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SXSW 2023

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TICKETMASTER FIGHTS BACK

ATLANTA'S NEW POWER BROKERS

LIL YACHTY

Shines on a trippy rock odyssey. Has he hit a new high?

PLUS

Kx5 // FEID

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TICKETMASTER FIGHTS BACK

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2023

FEID

Finds his true color —
and finally, solo stardom

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TICKETMASTER FIGHTS BACK

—

ATLANTA'S NEW POWER BROKERS

Kx5

Dance titans **Kaskade** and **deadmau5** join forces

PLUS

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Kaskade (left) and deadmau5

cu1ture above all

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VOLUME 135
NO. 3

ON THE COVERS
Feid photographed by Devin Christopher on Jan. 12 at Proper Studio in Miami.

Kaskade (left) and deadmau5 of Kx5 photographed by Austin Hargrave on Feb. 6 in Los Angeles.
On Kaskade: Givenchy sweater.
On deadmau5: AMIRI jacket.

Lil Yachty photographed by Peter Ash Lee on Jan. 25 at Shio Studio in Brooklyn.

THIS PAGE
Baby Tate photographed by Joelle Grace Taylor on Feb. 22 in Los Angeles.

TO OUR READERS
Billboard will publish its next issue on April 1. For 24/7 music coverage, go to billboard.com.

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How rapper-singer **Baby Tate** took a timeless '80s hook and turned it into her breakthrough hit.

CORRECTIONS

In the Women in Music executive list published in the Feb. 25 issue, the name of Warner Music Nashville's co-chair/co-president should have been spelled as Cris Lacy. The titles of these executives also should have appeared as Shani Gonzales, Warner Chappell U.K. executive vp/managing director and Warner Chappell Music head of international A&R; T&D Japan business department leader Seon Jeong; ADOR president Hee Jin; and CAA co-head of international touring/music agent Marlene Tsuchii, tour marketing agent Shannon Fitzgerald and music touring agent Maria May.

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charts

DATA FOR WEEK OF 3.11.2023

COURTESY OF REPUBLIC RECORDS

Never Say 'Die': The Weeknd And Ariana Grande Top Hot 100

BILLBOARD HOT 100

1

"Die for You"

The Weeknd & Ariana Grande

LAST WEEK	PEAK POSITION	WEEKS ON CHART
6	1	31

LIVING PROOF THAT a song can hit new heights long after its original release, "Die for You" by The Weeknd and Ariana Grande bounds from No. 6 to No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100.

The song tops the chart after it was first released on The Weeknd's album *Starboy* in 2016. It was revived in recent months thanks in part to TikTok, which helped spark new promotion by Republic Records. After its remix with Grande arrived Feb. 24, "Die for You" drew 81.1 million radio airplay audience impressions and 32.4 million streams (up 181%) and sold 14,000 downloads (up 1,170%) in the United States in the week ending March 2, according to Luminate.

The Weeknd and Grande each earn their seventh Hot 100 No. 1. In the days leading up to the remix's arrival, Grande posted on social media while on break from *Wicked: Part One*, "wrote and recorded a verse for my friend after a 14 hour day on set. this certain exception had to be made." It's their second Hot 100 No. 1 together, after "Save Your Tears" led for two weeks in 2021, also after Grande joined for its duet remix.

Grande simultaneously adds her 20th Hot 100 top 10. "Die for You" became The Weeknd's 16th, dating back to his first — also with Grande — when "Love Me Harder" reached No. 7 in 2014.

Meanwhile, The Weeknd and Grande mark the latest pair of soloists that have teamed up for multiple Hot 100 No. 1s. Drake and Future, Drake and Rihanna, Eminem and Rihanna, Nelly Furtado and Timbaland, and Jennifer Lopez and Ja Rule have also each logged a pair of shared chart-toppers. —GARY TRUST

charts

DATA FOR WEEK OF 3.11.2023

Hot 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title PRODUCER (SONGWRITER)	Artist IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
7	6	①	**#1 for 1 WEEK** **SAL/STM** **Die For You** THE WEEKND,CIRKUT,DOC MCKINNEY,CASHMERE CAT,PRINCE 85 (A.TESFAYE,M.MCKINNEY,PRINCE 85, DYLAN WIGGINS,M.A.HOIBERG,W.T.WALSH,H.R.WALTER,A.GRANDE)	**The Weeknd & Ariana Grande** XO/REPUBLIC	1	31
①	①	2	**Flowers** KID HARPOON,T.JOHNSON (M.CYRUS,M.R.POLLACK,G.HEIN)	**Miley Cyrus** SMILEY MILEY/COLUMBIA	1	7
②	②	③	**AIR** **Kill Bill** R.BISEL,C.LANG (S.I.ROWE,R.BISEL,C.LANG)	**SZA** TOP DAWG/RCA	2	12
④	③	4	**Boy's A Liar, Pt. 2** MURA MASA,PINKPANTHERESS (MURA MASA,PINKPANTHERESS)	**PinkPantheress & Ice Spice** PINKPANTHERESS/PARLOPHONE/ ELEKTRA/3EE	3	4
5	⑤	⑤	**Last Night** J.MOI (J.BYRON,A.G.GORLEY,J.K.HINDLIN,CHARLIE HANDSOME)	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	3	5
③	④	6	**Creepin'** METRO BOOMIN,DAHEALA (C.L.HAWKINS,E.SERMON,P.SMITH,M.C.JONES,E.N.BHRAONAIN,R.RYAN, N.RYAN,M.M.WINANS)	**Metro Boomin, The Weeknd & 21 Savage** BOOMINATI/REPUBLIC	3	13
HOT SHOT DEBUT		⑦	**TQG** OVY ON THE DRUMS (KAROL G,D.ECHAVARRIA OVIEDO,SHAKIRA,K.M.CRUZ MORENO)	**Karol G x Shakira** UNIVERSAL MUSIC LATINO/UMLE	7	1
6	7	8	**Unholy** ILYA,CIRKUT,B.SLATKIN,O.FEDI,JIMMY NAPES,S.SMITH (S.SMITH,J.J.NAPIER,I.SALMANZADEH,H.R.WALTER, B.SLATKTIN,O.FEDI,K.PETRAS)	**Sam Smith & Kim Petras** CAPITOL	1	23
8	8	9	**Anti-Hero** J.M.ANTONOFF,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT,J.M.ANTONOFF)	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	1	19
9	9	10	**Cuff It** B.KNOWLES CARTER,NOVA WAV,RISSI,RAPHAEL SAADIQ (B.G.KNOWLES CARTER,D.ANDREWS, B.C.CONEY,MORTEN RISTORP,RAPHAEL SAADIQ,T.Y.NASH,M.C.BROCKERT,A.H.MCGRIER,N.G.RODGERS, JR.)	**Beyoncé** PARKWOOD/COLUMBIA	6	29
10	10	11	**I'm Good (Blue)** D.GUETTA,TIMOFEY (B.REXHA,P.D.GUETTA,G.RANDONE,KAMILLE,M.GABUTTI,M.LOBINA,P.J.PLESTED)	**David Guetta & Bebe Rexha** WHAT A DJ/WARNER	4	27
⑪	⑪	12	**Just Wanna Rock** MCVERTT,SYNTHETIC (S.WOODS,M.CAMARA,J.MERCADO)	**Lil Uzi Vert** GENERATION NOW/ATLANTIC	10	20
16	⑮	⑬	**Thought You Should Know** J.MOI (M.WALLEN,N.GALYON,M.LAMBERT)	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	12	29
12	12	14	**As It Was** KID HARPOON,T.JOHNSON (H.STYLES,T.E.P.HULL,T.JOHNSON)	**Harry Styles** ERSKINE/COLUMBIA	1	48
㉕	⑲	⑮	**Calm Down** LONDON,ANDRE VIBEZ (M.HUNTER,ANDRE VIBEZ,A.IBANEZ,S.GOMEZ)	**Rema & Selena Gomez** JONZING WORLD/MAVIN/ SMG MUSIC/VIRGIN/INTERSCOPE	15	26
㉒	⑰	⑯	**Players** J.GOLDSTEIN (J.GOLDSTEIN,COI LERAY,A.C.KING,F.FERRARO,E.G.FLETCHER,S.ROBINSON,C.CHASE,M.GLOVER)	**Coi Leray** UPTOWN/REPUBLIC	16	9
⑱	⑯	⑰	**Rock And A Hard Place** A.R.SHAWN (H.WARREN,J.HACKWORTH,J.HARVEY)	**Bailey Zimmerman** ELEKTRA/WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE/3EE/WEA	16	38
⑰	⑱	⑱	**Under The Influence** KIDDOMINANT (C.M.BROWN,A.AGBOOLA,T.MCKIE,DAVIDO)	**Chris Brown** CBE/RCA	12	25
⑬	13	19	**Thank God** D.HUFF (C.D.STALNECKER,K.A.FISHMAN,J.FREE,J.HOGE,J.MULLINS)	**Kane Brown With Katelyn Brown** ZONE 4/RCA NASHVILLE/RCA	13	25
14	14	20	**Rich Flex** VINYLZ,TAY KEITH,FNZ,BOOGZDABEAST (C.J.HARRIS, JR.,A.GRAHAM,S.B.A.JOSEPH,A.HERNANDEZ, B.L.CHAMBERS,M.J.MULE,I.J.DEBONI,J.GWIN,C.BERNSTEIN,M.J.PETE,B.D.SESSION JR,A.GENEEN WHITE, G.HAYES,A. DAVIS)	**Drake & 21 Savage** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	2	17

Go to the Chart Beat section of billboard.com for complete charts coverage.

The 23-year-old Syracuse, N.Y., native's first Hot 100 entry also reaches a No. 6 high on Hot Rap Songs.

JULIAN BURGUEÑO

HOT 100

44

"Favorite Song"

Toosii

What was the creation process like for "Favorite Song"?

I was just going through the motions. People don't know a lot of the music that I make has to do with my personal life. I know certain things that a woman looks for and wants. I wrote the song riding in my car [around] seven in the morning, playing the beat and singing the melody. Whatever the beat makes me feel like, that's what I go with. It's the biggest accomplishment of my career. I wrote in my notebook that this was going to be one of the things that I did, and it happened in a blink of an eye — I didn't know I would be making [the Hot 100] a month after.

Do you consider yourself a hopeless romantic?

Definitely. I was raised by my mom, and growing up, I've always seen the things that she desired and looked for [in a partner]. I was infatuated with seeing her smile and be happy — it was always something that I wanted to give to the person that I was with.

You recently played arenas in support of Rod Wave. What was that experience like?

I'm a homebody: I got my studio at my house, I got food. I don't have to leave really, so to go outside and see how many people actually knew Toosii was crazy. The craziest cities were probably Phoenix or [in] Minnesota, but every city we went to was a great crowd. They knew almost every song word-for-word. I interacted with the fans a lot — one thing that works well for me is I always try to get the crowd to laugh. If you can make the crowd laugh, you can win the crowd over.

—CYDNEY LEE

HOT 100 FIRST-TIMERS

Artists who have recently made their initial appearances on the chart

ARTIST	SONG	DEBUT POSITION	DEBUT DATE
Toosii	**"Favorite Song"**	51	March 4
Lizzy McAlpine	**"Ceilings"**	75	March 4
LU KALA	**"Lottery"** with Latto	83	March 4
Ovy on the Drums	**"Cairo"** with Karol G	82	March 11
Justin Quiles & Angel Dior	**"Ojos Ferrari"** with Karol G	95	March 11
Carla Morrison	**"Mañana Será Bonito"** with Karol G	98	March 11

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD HOT 100: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR CURRENT SONGS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA BY ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE, RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE AND SALES DATA AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS.

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BILLBOARD 200

2

SZA
SOS

As Karol G debuts at No. 1, it's the first time a woman has replaced another woman at the top since Adele's *30* bumped Taylor Swift's *Red (Taylor's Version)* upon its entry on the chart dated Dec. 4, 2021.

4

Yeat
AfterLyfe

It's the rapper's first No. 1 on Top Rap Albums and third top 10 on the Billboard 200. It earned 55,000 equivalent album units in the United States in the week ending March 2, according to Luminate.

19

GODSMACK
LIGHTING UP THE SKY

Godsmack
Lighting Up the Sky

The set marks the fourth No. 1 for the band on the nearly 16-year-old Top Hard Rock Albums chart. On the Billboard 200, all 11 of the group's entries to date have reached the top 40.

3

Gorillaz
Cracker Island

Gorillaz score their sixth top 10-charting release on the Billboard 200 as *Cracker Island* arrives at No. 3 with 64,500 equivalent album units earned in the United States in the week ending March 2, according to Luminate. Of that sum, album sales comprise 48,500, making it the top-selling title of the week (debuting at No. 1 on Top Album Sales).

The star-studded set boasts guest turns from artists such as Bad Bunny, Beck, Bootie Brown, Stevie Nicks, Tame Impala and Thundercat. The album was initially released Feb. 24 as a 10-track standard edition across physical and streaming formats, along with an 11-track digital retail and streaming edition. On Feb. 27, a 15-track digital and streaming deluxe version arrived, including bonus songs with De La Soul and Del the Funky Homosapien. —KEITH CAULFIELD

Billboard 200

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist IMPRINT/DISTRIBUTING LABEL	Title	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
HOT SHOT DEBUT		①	#1 for 1 WEEK **Karol G** UNIVERSAL MUSIC LATINO/UMLE	**Manana Sera Bonito**	1	1
1	1	2	**SZA** TOP DAWG/RCA	**SOS**	1	12
NEW		③	**Gorillaz** PARLOPHONE/WARNER	**Cracker Island**	3	1
NEW		④	**Yeat** FIELD TRIP/GEFFEN/IGA	**AfterLyfe**	4	1
3	3	5	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	**Midnights**	1	19
4	5	⑥	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	**Dangerous: The Double Album**	1	112
6	④	7	**Metro Boomin** BOOMINATI/REPUBLIC	**Heroes & Villains**	1	13
NEW		⑧	**Don Toliver** CACTUS JACK/ATLANTIC/AG	**Love Sick**	8	1
⑯	14	⑨	GG **The Weeknd** XO/REPUBLIC	**Starboy**	1	278
5	6	10	**Bad Bunny** RIMAS	**Un Verano Sin Ti**	1	43
7	7	11	**Drake & 21 Savage** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	**Her Loss**	1	17
31	29	12	PS **The Weeknd** XO/REPUBLIC	**The Highlights**	2	107
NEW		⑬	**Key Glock** PAPER ROUTE EMPIRE	**Glockoma 2**	13	1
11	8	14	**Zach Bryan** BELTING BRONCO/WARNER	**American Heartbreak**	5	41
-	②	15	**P!nk** RCA	**Trustfall**	2	2
13	11	16	**Lil Baby** QUALITY CONTROL/MOTOWN	**It's Only Me**	1	20
9	10	17	**Harry Styles** ERSKINE/COLUMBIA	**Harry's House**	1	41
12	13	18	**Beyonce** PARKWOOD/COLUMBIA	**Renaissance**	1	31
NEW		⑲	**Godsmack** BMG	**Lighting Up The Sky**	19	1
22	24	⑳	**SZA** TOP DAWG/RCA	**Ctrl**	3	299

SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD 200: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR ALBUMS, BASED ON MULTIMETRIC CONSUMPTION, BLENDING TRADITIONAL ALBUM SALES, STREAMING-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS AND TRACK-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS, AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2023 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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Shakira (left) and Karol G

JAUME DE LAIGUANA

GLOBAL 200

1

“TQG”
Karol G x Shakira

KAROL G MAKES history as the Latin music superstar crowns the all-genre Billboard 200 for the first time with *Mañana Será Bonito* — the first all-Spanish-language No. 1 by a woman. It’s her second leader on Top Latin Albums.

The set starts with 94,000 equivalent album units earned in the United States in the week ending March 2, according to Luminate. Its start was powered largely by streaming activity: 118.7 million official on-demand streams for its songs, marking the biggest streaming week ever by a woman for a Latin music album.

Meanwhile, *Mañana Será Bonito*’s “TQG,” with Shakira, launches at No. 1 on the Billboard Global 200 and Billboard Global Excl. U.S. charts, becoming the first leader for each artist on the lists. The song begins with 158.4 million streams and 10,000 sold worldwide.

“TQG” also debuts at No. 7 on the all-genre, U.S.-based Billboard Hot 100, where it’s Karol G’s first top 10 and fellow Colombian Shakira’s sixth — and the latter’s second this year, following the No. 9-peaking “BZRP Music Sessions, Vol. 53” with Bizarrap. “TQG” arrives with 29 million streams, 4.6 million in airplay audience and 7,000 sold in the United States.

Karol G additionally takes over Hot Latin Songs, placing 16 tracks on the 50-position chart — the most ever by a woman — 13 of which are debuts. All 16 are from the new album. “TQG” leads at No. 1, marking her sixth leader and Shakira’s 13th, while five of the set’s tracks rank in the top 10 — also a first for a woman. The only other acts to have claimed at least half of the top 10 in a single week are Bad Bunny, J Balvin and Ozuna.

—KEITH CAULFIELD

Global 200

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title	Artist	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
HOT SHOT DEBUT		①	**#1 for 1 WEEK** **TQG**	**Karol G x Shakira**	1	1
22	19	②	**GG** **Die For You**	**The Weeknd & Ariana Grande**	2	52
1	1	3	**Flowers**	**Miley Cyrus**	1	7
2	2	4	**Kill Bill**	**SZA**	1	12
④	③	5	**Boy’s A Liar, Pt. 2**	**PinkPantheress & Ice Spice**	3	4
6	4	6	**Calm Down**	**Rema & Selena Gomez**	3	35
3	5	7	**Bzrp Music Sessions, Vol. 53**	**Bizarrap & Shakira**	2	8
5	6	8	**Unholy**	**Sam Smith & Kim Petras**	1	23
8	7	9	**Creepin’**	**Metro Boomin, The Weeknd & 21 Savage**	3	13
12	12	⑩	**Last Night**	**Morgan Wallen**	10	5
7	8	11	**As It Was**	**Harry Styles**	1	48
9	9	12	**I’m Good (Blue)**	**David Guetta & Bebe Rexha**	2	27
11	10	13	**Anti-Hero**	**Taylor Swift**	1	19
10	11	14	**Escapism**	**RAYE Featuring 070 Shake**	7	14
⑯	15	⑮	**Until I Found You**	**Stephen Sanchez**	11	42
⑬	13	16	**Sure Thing**	**Miguel**	13	11
⑰	16	⑰	**Yandel 150**	**Yandel & Feid**	16	8
51	44	⑱	**X Si Volvemos**	**Karol G x Romeo Santos**	18	4
14	14	19	**OMG**	**NewJeans**	10	9
24	23	20	**Save Your Tears**	**The Weeknd & Ariana Grande**	1	113

STREAMING AND SALES DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD GLOBAL 200: THE WEEK’S MOST POPULAR SONGS BASED ON STREAMING AND SALES ACTIVITY FROM OVER 200 TERRITORIES AROUND THE WORLD — INCLUDING THE UNITED STATES — AS TRACKED BY LUMINATE. THE RANKING IS BASED ON A WEIGHTED FORMULA INCORPORATING OFFICIAL-ONLY STREAMS ON BOTH SUBSCRIPTION AND AD-SUPPORTED TIERS OF LEADING AUDIO AND VIDEO MUSIC SERVICES, PLUS DOWNLOAD SALES FROM TOP MUSIC RETAILERS ACROSS THE GLOBE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2023 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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ARTIST 100

1

MORGAN WALLEN

WEEKS ON CHART

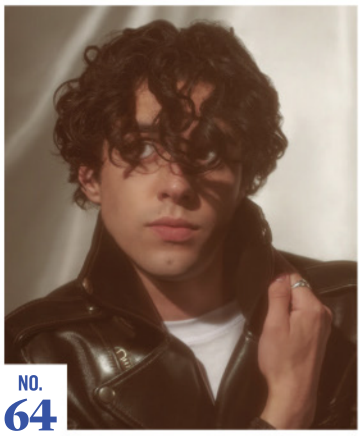
208

The singer-songwriter leads the Billboard Artist 100 ahead of his expected debut atop the March 18-dated Billboard 200 and Top Country Albums charts with his latest project, *One Thing at a Time*. His previous set, *Dangerous: The Double Album*, leads the latter list (dated March 11) for a record-extending 97th week. —GARY TRUST

NO.
47

Lambert Climbs 'High'

Adam Lambert reenters the Artist 100 at No. 47, his highest rank since July 2015, when he reached a No. 16 best. His return is fueled by his newest album, his covers project *High Drama*, which starts at No. 7 on Top Album Sales — his fifth top 10 and highest-charting entry on the list since 2015's *The Original High* peaked at No. 2. *High Drama* includes renditions of top 40-charting Billboard Hot 100 hits such as Culture Club's "Do You Really Want To Hurt Me," Duran Duran's "Ordinary World," Sia's "Chandelier" and Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for a Hero." —KEITH CAULFIELD



NO.
64

Sanchez's Steady Success

Stephen Sanchez's "Until I Found You" tops Rock Digital Song Sales for the first time, up 16% to 3,000 downloads sold, according to Luminate. After the love song was released in September 2021, TikTok helped spark its ascent on multiple radio charts, and it has since hit the top 10 on Triple A (No. 4 peak), Adult Top 40 (No. 6, where it holds on the March 11 chart) and Mainstream Top 40 (No. 10). A version featuring Em Beihold was serviced to the latter two formats. Concurrently, the track reaches a new No. 2 high on the multimetric Hot Rock & Alternative Songs chart. —KEVIN RUTHERFORD

Artist 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist	IMPRINT/LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
2	3	1	**#1 for 7 WEEKS** **Morgan Wallen**	BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	1	208
4	4	2	**SZA**	TOP DAWG/RCA	1	183
RE-ENTRY		③	**Gorillaz**	PARLOPHONE/WARNER	2	19
3	1	4	**Taylor Swift**	REPUBLIC	1	449
RE-ENTRY		⑤	**Karol G**	UNIVERSAL MUSIC LATINO/UMLE	5	33
7	6	6	**The Weeknd**	XO/REPUBLIC	1	399
⑥	7	7	**Luke Combs**	RIVER HOUSE/COLUMBIA NASHVILLE/SMN	1	313
①	5	8	**Rihanna**	WESTBURY ROAD/ROC NATION	1	252
8	8	9	**Miley Cyrus**	SMILEY MILEY/COLUMBIA	3	123
61	②	10	**P!nk**	RCA	1	217
10	9	9	**Drake**	OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	1	453
9	10	12	**Harry Styles**	ERSKINE/COLUMBIA	1	192
13	13	13	**Kendrick Lamar**	PGLANG/TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/IGA	1	374
14	12	14	**21 Savage**	SLAUGHTER GANG/EPIC	3	131
RE-ENTRY		⑮	**Godsmack**	BMG	11	6
19	16	16	**Future**	FREEBANDZ/EPIC	1	276
16	18	17	**Post Malone**	MERCURY/REPUBLIC	1	349
24	17	18	**Lil Uzi Vert**	GENERATION NOW/ATLANTIC/AG	1	211
21	20	19	**Lil Baby**	QUALITY CONTROL/MOTOWN	1	251
20	19	20	**Zach Bryan**	BELTING BRONCO/WARNER	11	42

WALLEN: RYAN SMITH. LAMBERT: COURTESY OF FULL COVERAGE COMMUNICATIONS. SANCHEZ: MEREDITH TRUAX.

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD ARTIST 100: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR ARTISTS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AND ALBUM AND TRACK SALES AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE AND STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA FROM ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2023 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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NO. 7

Paisley, Zelenskyy Debut

"Same Here," the first release by Brad Paisley (above) on Universal Music Group Nashville's EMI Records, enters Digital Song Sales at No. 7 with 5,000 sold Feb. 24-March 2, according to Luminate. Featuring a spoken section from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the track benefits United24, a charitable program to restore Ukrainian homes destroyed during the ongoing Russian invasion that began Feb. 24, 2022.

"The label [was] so great about it, realizing this isn't going to be the feel-good hit of the year and this isn't going to be something that's going to work long term at radio, [that's] not going to research," Paisley says, noting that all serviced radio airplay will include Zelenskyy's section. "I thought, 'Would President Zelenskyy like to have the last couple of minutes and have a discussion with me on the ways we're the same?' This needs to exist in whatever form we can present it."

—JIM ASKER AND MELINDA NEWMAN

Digital Song Sales

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	Artist	WKS. ON CHART
2	1	#1 for 1 WEEK **Last Night** BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**Morgan Wallen**	5
1	2	**Flowers** SMILEY MILEY/COLUMBIA	**Miley Cyrus**	8
NEW	3	**Die For You** XO/REPUBLIC	**The Weeknd & Ariana Grande**	1
NEW	4	**TQG** UNIVERSAL MUSIC LATINO/UMLE	**Karol G x Shakira**	1
5	5	**Funky Cold Medina** DELICIOUS VINYL/THE BICYCLE MUSIC COMPANY/CRAFT/CONCORD	**Tone-Loc**	5
13	6	**Thought You Should Know** BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	**Morgan Wallen**	21
NEW	7	**Same Here** LOADED GOAT/EMI NASHVILLE/UMGN	**Brad Paisley Featuring President Volodymyr Zelenskyy**	1
8	8	**Bust A Move** DELICIOUS VINYL/THE BICYCLE MUSIC COMPANY/CRAFT/CONCORD	**Young M.C.**	4
21	9	**Calm Down** JONZING WORLD/SMG MUSIC/INTERSCOPE/MAVIN/IGA	**Rema & Selena Gomez**	12
9	10	**Unholy** CAPITOL	**Sam Smith & Kim Petras**	24

NO. 1

Good News For Bad Omens

Bad Omens score their first radio No. 1 as "Just Pretend" jumps to the top of Mainstream Rock Airplay. The song follows three previous appearances on the chart by the band, which formed in Richmond, Va., in 2015: "Limits" (No. 19 peak in 2020), "Never Know" (No. 25, 2021) and its first top 10, "Like a Villain" (No. 10, 2022).

The track is the second single, following "Like a Villain," from *The Death of Peace of Mind*, Bad Omens' third studio album. The set has earned 170,000 equivalent album units since its February 2022 release, according to Luminate.

"Just Pretend" reaching the top of Mainstream Rock Airplay marks the second No. 1 on the chart for Sumerian Records. The label has generated 10 top 10s on the list, dating to its first, Asking Alexandria's No. 6-peaking "Moving On" in 2015. Nita Strauss and David Draiman led for three weeks in January 2022 with "Dead Inside."

—KEVIN RUTHERFORD

Mainstream Rock Airplay

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	Artist	WKS. ON CHART
3	1	#1 for 1 WEEK **Just Pretend** SUMERIAN	**Bad Omens**	27
4	2	**Lost** WARNER	**Linkin Park**	3
2	3	**Bad Man** REPRISE/WARNER	**Disturbed**	16
1	4	**Welcome To The Circus** BETTER NOISE	**Five Finger Death Punch**	17
6	5	**Jack** BIG LOUD ROCK/BIG LOUD	**HARDY**	19
9	6	**Dead Don't Die** ATLANTIC/3EE	**Shinedown**	6
5	7	**Lux Aeterna** BLACKENED/Q PRIME	**Metallica**	14
8	8	**I Am The Weapon** RCA	**Three Days Grace**	23
12	9	**Black Sheep** ROC NATION/CO5	**DOROTHY**	24
11	10	**Paranoid (Crash & Burn)** MELODY CATALOG/MNRK HEAVY/MNRK	**Pop Evil**	20

PAISLEY: JEFF LIPSKY. OMENS: OSWALDO CEPEDA.

SALES AND AIRPLAY DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE DIGITAL SONG SALES: THE WEEK'S TOP DOWNLOADED SONGS, RANKED BY SALES DATA AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. MAINSTREAM ROCK AIRPLAY: THE WEEK'S MOST MAINSTREAM ROCK SONGS, RANKED BY RADIO DETECTIONS AS MEASURED BY MEDIABASE AND PROVIDED BY LUMINATE. STATIONS ARE ELECTRONICALLY MONITORED 24 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2023 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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MUSIC AND MONEY

Ticketmaster’s Post-Swift Strategy: Take On Ticket Fees

Although a cyberattack undermined a presale for the superstar’s The Eras Tour, the Live Nation-owned company is focusing on eliminating its “drip pricing” model

BY DAVE BROOKS // ILLUSTRATION BY MARCO MELGRATI

AFTER WEEKS OF STRATEGIZING how to salvage Ticketmaster’s reputation in the wake of last November’s Taylor Swift presale debacle and Live Nation president/CFO Joe Berchtold’s January grilling by the Senate Judiciary Committee, the ticketing giant’s parent company has settled on an approach that will ramp up lobbying (see story, page 18) to hit back at scalpers while educating consumers about ticketing fees.

Despite breaking two company records with the Nov. 15 The Eras Tour presale — the most tickets ever sold in a single day (2.4 million) and, according to the company, keeping 95% of those tickets off secondary sites like StubHub and SeatGeek — Ticketmaster found itself cast as the villain and Live Nation as a monopoly after a cyberattack disrupted over 100,000 transactions.

The outcry has led to a mixture of disbelief and self-reflection at Live Nation’s global headquarters in Beverly Hills, Calif. “The company enables music fans to connect with the world’s greatest artists through concerts and events that often become the cornerstone moments of people’s lives,” says a Live Nation executive who was not authorized to speak on the record. “Why the fuck do people hate us so much?”

Although the controversy over the Swift presale had to do with ticket availability rather than price — the prime complaint of Ticketmaster’s July 2022 Verified Fan sale of tickets to Bruce Springsteen’s 2023 tour — the executive says that Live Nation has determined that redeeming itself with consumers “starts with the fees,” which can add over 30% to the final price of a concert ticket.

“We’ve got to now go out and do a much better job so policymakers and consumers understand how the business operates,” Live Nation president/CEO Michael Rapino said during the company’s most recent investor call. “We’ve historically not had a big incentive to shout out loud that venues are charging high service fees or artist costs are expensive. But I think now [that] education is paramount.”

Lyric Capital raised over $800 million to fuel new catalog acquisitions.

TikTok added a default 60-minute daily screen-time limit for minors.

Spotify began testing "token-enabled playlists" with Web3 entities including **Overlord** and Universal Music Group's virtual band **Kingshop**.

Lil Peep's former label, **First Access Entertainment**, settled a wrongful-death lawsuit with the late rapper's mother.

Ticketmaster's main source of revenue comes from the fees it charges to process ticket transactions. A ticket's face value goes to the artist, while the ticketing giant shares the fees it collects with the venues that contract for its services.

Ticketmaster typically keeps $2 to $5 per ticket for processing costs and a small portion of the fees it collects to recoup any loans, advances or bonuses it may have paid the venue to win its ticketing contract. Contracts for large venues can be worth millions of dollars. The balance of the fees collected goes to the venue, which uses the money to cover the cost of the show.

Traditionally, promoters book venues for artists, pay rent to use the space and hire its staff. What's left over as profit is divvied up with the act, which typically receives 80% to 85% of that amount.

But as competition to book top-shelf headline talent has increased over the last decade, venues have reduced the rent they charge and promoters have agreed to take a smaller percentage of base ticket sales — sometimes as little as 5%.

> "The company enables fans to connect with the world's greatest artists. Why the fuck do people hate us so much?"
>
> —A LIVE NATION EXECUTIVE

As Rapino said on the investor call: "The artist takes most of that ticket fee base. So the way that the venue, the promoter or the ticketing company [earns its] revenue fees is through that extra fee."

The increasing costs of concert production, which are borne by the promoter, have also widened the gap between a ticket's face value and the final amount charged after fees, which can induce sticker shock when two $100 tickets can end up costing $265. While it has been very profitable for Ticketmaster to cover more of a concert's costs through these fees, it has helped turn ticket buyers against the company.

Ticketmaster executives are hoping a simple fix can solve the problem — showing the total cost of a ticket, face value plus fees, at the beginning of the checkout process. That method is already used in New York, where it is mandated by state law.

"We all want to know what is the true cost to see the show when we start shopping," Rapino said on the call. "We wish that would be mandated tomorrow across the board [because] that would relieve a lot of the stress [and] the consumer's perception that there's this magical extra fee added on" that isn't part of the overall show cost.

Ticketmaster and other ticketing companies have long debated whether to abandon what's known as a "drip pricing" model but haven't pulled the trigger because studies show that fans are more likely to make a purchase if the fees that are tacked onto the face value of a ticket don't appear until checkout. Secondary-market ticketing companies have also adopted the practice, advertising tickets at prices below those sold on the primary market, then hitting consumers with a 35% to 45% markup at checkout.

In a move more closely tied to the Swift situation, Ticketmaster has also decided to target scalpers through legislation and has drafted a bill called the FAIR Ticketing Act that would outlaw drip pricing and grant artists the ability to ban scalper websites from reselling their tour tickets. Pro-ticket scalping groups have proposed their own counterlegislation, effectively banning Ticketmaster from using its proprietary technology to stop scalpers. Neither bill has a congressional sponsor in either chamber of Congress, however, and unless that happens, neither has any chance of passing.

Ticketmaster does appear to have some serious muscle in its corner when it comes to the scalping issue. In a February interview with *Billboard*, Gregg Perloff, founder and CEO of independent promoter Another Planet Entertainment, which produces San Francisco's Outside Lands festival, said: "My question for [Congress] is, 'Why are you picking on Ticketmaster and Live Nation when you should be outlawing brokers?' They are the ones who screw up everything. Does every promoter take a few tickets? Does every venue have a few tickets? ... Sure. But it's the scalpers that make it so no one can get a decent seat except the rich. The Senate didn't do the research they should have done before they started pontificating and acting like they knew what they were talking about."

In addition, Perloff suggested that touring artists were partially responsible because they "really want to go on sale for the whole tour at once because they can advertise the whole tour at once and make a bigger splash." Regarding Swift's tour, he said, "There's no system in the world — and this is where I have to defend Ticketmaster — that could have handled the onslaught."

Also in February, at the Pollstar Live conference in Los Angeles, music mogul Irving Azoff and Madison Square Garden Entertainment chairman James Dolan took on pro-scalping journalist-podcaster Eric Fuller when he argued that scalping made tickets cheaper, citing discredited media reports of bargain bin-priced tickets available for Springsteen's North American tour dates.

"It's about a half-hour conversation, but you're dead wrong," Azoff told Fuller, who also operates a consulting business in ticketing.

"You got to take your hat off to this paid lobbying group that's working for the scalpers," Dolan chimed in. "These guys are pretty good. Maybe we should hire them." In response, Fuller says Dolan's comments are "grossly inaccurate." ◼

TICKETMASTER'S $1.1M LOBBYING PUSH

With the touring giant in the crosshairs of U.S. lawmakers, its expenditures are likely to grow even more in 2023

LIVE NATION PRESIDENT/CFO Joe Berchtold might have been the sole defender of his company's 2010 merger with Ticketmaster at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in January, but behind the scenes, he wasn't alone.

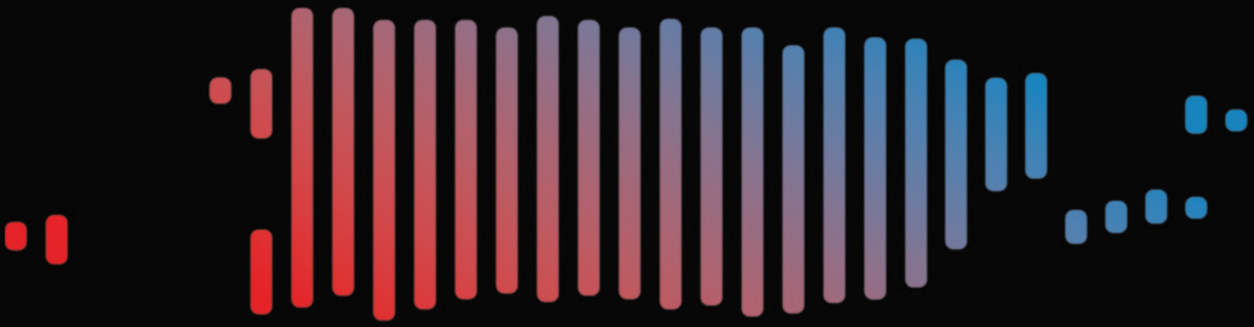
Advising Berchtold and managing key relationships on Capitol Hill is a small army of over 30 lobbyists, deployed to defend the company from growing criticism by senators like Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. Klobuchar, who serves as the chair of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Competition Policy, Antitrust and Consumer Rights, has made repeated calls to the Department of Justice to investigate Ticketmaster and break up the company if any wrongdoing is uncovered during a DOJ review of the consent decree it created to foster competition in ticketing. That review is expected to wrap up soon.

While Live Nation's lobbying spending has been historically low for a company of its size and dominance, that's changing. Last year, the company spent nearly five times as much on lobbying as it has in the past, according to data from Open Secrets, which uses public records to track such spending. From 2012 to 2018, Live Nation spent an average of $225,000 annually to lobby federal officials. In 2022, its annual lobbying expenses had increased to $1.1 million. The company's agendas include defending criticism regarding Ticketmaster's handling of the Swift presale last November.

One of those insiders is Seth Bloom, a former longtime general counsel for the Senate's antitrust subcommittee and advisory board member for the American Antitrust Institute. Another is Jonathan Becker, a former chief of staff and chief counsel to Klobuchar who now serves as a partner at law firm Mayer Brown and represented a dozen big-name clients in 2022, including Meta, Microsoft and Phillip Morris.

Live Nation now spends significantly more than its competitors in the touring sector. Last year, entertainment conglomerate AEG spent $140,000 on federal lobbying, according to Open Secrets, while secondary-market ticketing competitor SeatGeek spent $170,000 and Viagogo, the British company that bought StubHub in 2020, spent $140,000. Live Nation partner company Oak View Group spent $570,000 on lobbying, while Spotify, which has rolled out a new ticketing offering for concert promoters and is hoping to broaden its reach within the live space, spent $710,000.

Live Nation could spend even more this year as it ramps up efforts to exit the consent decree. The company now has more than seven lobbying firms working for it on issues that include ticketing, event safety and Federal Aviation Administration rules on the use of drones at events. —D.B.



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Brad Paisley signed with Universal Music Group Nashville's **EMI Records Nashville.**

Thomas H. Lee, the billionaire investor who helped acquire Warner Music from Time Warner, died at 78.

Life In The Fast Lane

Labels embrace sped-up TikTok remixes

BY ELIAS LEIGHT

LAST FALL, THE 25-YEAR-OLD English singer Raye was on the hunt for her first U.S. hit after several years of U.K. chart success. Initially, the loping hip-hop soul single "Escapism" seemed to bring her no closer. After the first week, streams of the track started to fall, according to Luminate. But in mid-November, its trajectory dramatically reversed, leaping from 185,000 streams one week to 500,000 the next to over 6 million two weeks later. "Escapism" went on to peak at No. 22 on the Billboard Hot 100.

What happened? The burgeoning popularity of a homemade sped-up remix of "Escapism" that captivated TikTok users, spurring them to incorporate it into their videos and driving streams of the original. "I wish that I could sit here and say, 'We were in our marketing meeting, we decided that we were going to do a sped-up version of this particular spot in the song, and that's going to ignite all the rest of it,' " says J. Erving, a longtime music manager, founder of the artist services and distribution company Human Re-Sources — which signed Raye — and executive vp of creative development at Sony Music Entertainment. "The kids are taking control of the songs, and they're determining what part of the record is sticky and what version of it is sticky."

Those "sticky" versions — often just sped up or slowed down, or a pair of tracks mashed together — can spark streams. "These remixes can really create careers and reignite careers," Universal Music Group (UMG) vp of A&R strategy Nima Nasseri says. "They're great mechanisms for growth. Every label is putting them out," often releasing official versions of the remixes that trend on short-form video platforms.

"Escapism" is not an outlier: Sped-up remixes also spurred recent chart surges for Miguel's "Sure Thing" (actually a resurge, as it first charted over a decade ago), The Weeknd's "Die for You," Lady Gaga's "Bloody Mary" and Thundercat's "Them Changes," among others. And similar remixes have boosted many other songs, from rock duo Cafuné's "Tek It" to Mariah Carey's "It's a Wrap."

Remixes — extended for club play, shortened and punched up for radio — are nothing new. And listeners taking control has been a hallmark of the shift to digital, starting with YouTube fan covers in the 2000s and progressing in the streaming era to fan response helping labels determine what tracks to focus on for promotion.

The difference today is the extent to which power has shifted to social media users. The process, says Erving, is no longer about label executives and managers deciding "this is our single, insert remix producer here, add rapper here, this is going to be the thing — those days are over." In fact, according to a major-label A&R executive, "it's not about the recording anymore. It's about what you're offering the user base to say, 'Hey, you're an intelligent consumer. Here are the stems [individual audio components] for our songs. Do what you want to it.' "

"Is anything in its final form now?" one major-label marketing executive asks. "Or are we just putting out clay for fans to mold?"

Part of this change is technological — it has never been easier to manipulate audio. "These [remixes] are being made easily by fans in real time on their computer or phones," says RCA Records COO John Fleckenstein.

Like many in the music industry, Fleckenstein believes this remixing activity is also part of a generational shift. "Gen Z has an expectation, because they've grown up as digital natives, that if you do something, they can iterate or comment on it," he explains. "That doesn't end in the comments section of a social media post: It's now bleeding into the art itself."

While it's common to encounter both sped-up and slowed-down remixes on short-form video platforms, Nasseri says the sped-up versions have been driving more engagement recently. (In 2021, his team worked on a successful campaign for Trinidad Cardona's "Dinero," which became the top track on TikTok thanks in part to a slowed version.) Adding tempo can "make the songs better — it brings out a different emotion," says Josh "Bru" Brubaker, a TikToker (4.5 million followers) and radio personality for Audacy. Fleckenstein recalls his 14-year-old daughter telling him, "You can do a lot more on your TikTok with a sped-up version of the song."

Most remixes don't replace or distract fans from the original track — they draw attention to it. "From a discovery standpoint, we see a large amount of referral traffic make its way back to original tracks from remixes," says Roneil Rumburg, co-founder/CEO of Audius, a blockchain-based streaming service. For example, the original of Raye's "Escapism" (270 million streams) is significantly out-streaming its sped-up remix (104 million) on Spotify.

Since discovery is increasingly difficult to engineer in a time of content overload, the music industry is encouraging fan experimentation with songs and aiding the creation of remixes. "There's a whole community of TikTok DJs solely making these sounds to try to make them go viral because you get so much exposure," Brubaker says. Labels and marketers sometimes pay these DJs anywhere from a few hundred dollars to $20,000 to remix and post songs. Nasseri's UMG team works closely with several of the most popular producers in this space, including Kuya Magik (whose recent sped-up rendition of PinkPantheress and Ice Spice's "Boy's a liar Pt. 2" has already appeared in over 250,000 videos) and xxtristanxo (his sped-up version of Carey's "It's a Wrap" has soundtracked 1.1 million TikTok videos), keeping them on retainer.

Labels have also worked to get officially released sped-up remixes visibility on streaming services. UMG started the Spotify account Speed Radio to highlight its sped-up tracks, according to Nasseri; it has nearly 10 million monthly listeners. Another account, sped up nightcore, does the same for Warner Music Group releases; it has over 12 million monthly listeners. (A WMG representative did not respond to requests for comment on this account.) "Anytime we get one of these remixes that has traction, we tag it with Speed Radio, and it just amplifies the growth," says Nasseri. "That's a very valuable tool for artists to use."

The streaming services have created playlists for these remixes as well. Spotify's Sped Up Songs, launched last June, now has over 1 million followers. Apple Music recently unveiled Viral Remixed.

Even as these remixes have helped create hits, not every artist wants to participate. "There are artists that are really protective of their music, and they just don't care," says Nasseri. But any stigma around tempo-shifted remixes is fading. "Two years ago, I'd say 5% or 10% of artists were receptive to this," he estimates. "Now it's probably about 70%." Meng Ru Kuok, CEO of music technology company BandLab, adds, "Rights holders understand that this process is inevitable, and it's one of the best ways to bring new life to tracks."

Sped-up and slowed-down versions haven't penetrated the mainstream — yet. "It still feels more specific to the short-form platforms right now than 'I heard a great sped-up version at the club last night,' " says Fleckenstein.

But this could change. Cafuné broke out with "Tek It"; the sped-up version now has more streams (143 million) than the original (137 million) on Spotify. Fleckenstein points to young RCA act Ari Abdul, who has enjoyed streaming success with the synthwave single "Babydoll." "Sometimes the sped-up version is actually outperforming the original," he says.

Will these tempo-shifted remixes eventually reach radio? "If it's good enough," says Fleckenstein, "you never know."

ILLUSTRATION BY GREG KLETSEL

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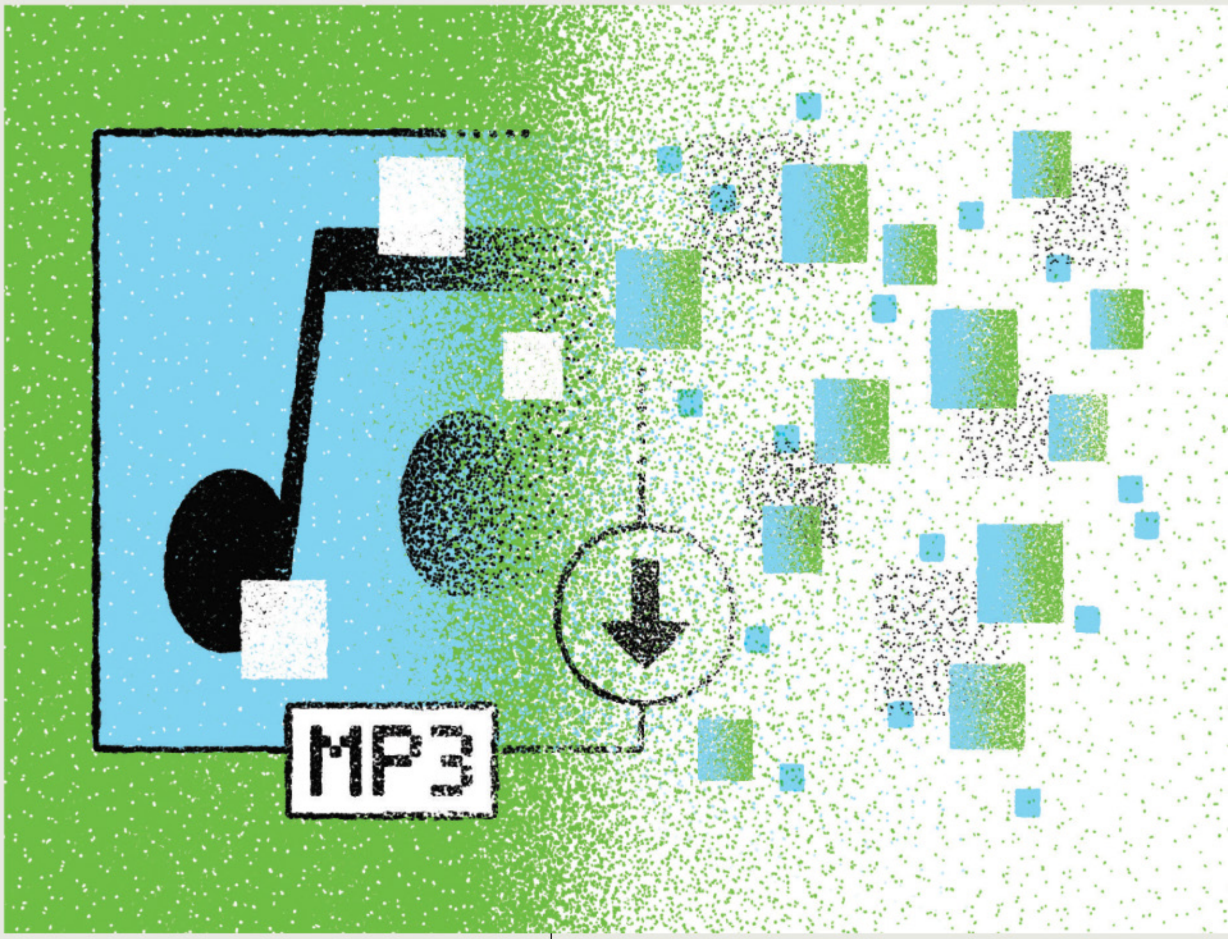
John Esposito was named chairman of the **T.J. Martell Foundation** as the organization rebuilds from an embezzlement scandal.

George Harrison's solo recorded works are now at BMG under a partnership with Dark Horse Records.

DOWNLOADS GOING DOWN

While physical formats have turned around a decline, paid downloads continue to plummet

BY STEVE KNOPPER



IN THE NAPSTER ERA, paid downloads were a music industry savior, generating $1.3 billion at their peak in 2012, according to Luminate. But the format seems like it's headed toward extinction. Digital track sales have plummeted over the past decade, from 1.3 billion in 2012 to 152 million last year, a decrease of 88.6% — in 2022 alone, they dropped 25.1% from the previous year.

The declining importance of the format is evident in the desktop version of Apple's once mighty iTunes Store, which now buries such purchases halfway down its Apple Music homepage. At Amazon, searching for MP3s diverts consumers to the Amazon Music streaming platform, where options include streaming as well purchasing digital music, vinyl or CDs.

"It's a business that has been in steady decline for years," says a source at a major label, adding that the company doesn't receive complaints from consumers about the lack of prominently displayed downloads on retail sites. "We're in a streaming economy now."

That said, the sale of 152 million tracks translates to revenue exceeding $152 million, and many artists and labels say the format remains both useful and lucrative. If an artist racks up a significant number of digital sales — like Bonnie Raitt, who sold 9,000 downloads of "Just Like That" in the week following her February Grammy Award win for song of the year — it can boost chart performance and validate career relevance. (A download sale is weighted more heavily in determining *Billboard* chart metrics than a single stream.)

And download sales can be valuable in other ways. In January 2021, two years after Avery Anna became TikTok famous as a high school student for singing country songs in a bathtub while self-isolating during the pandemic, her track "Just Cause I Love You" shot up the iTunes chart. "When we see something pop up on that chart, that certainly makes us pay attention," says Warner Nashville senior vp of commercial partnerships Tim Foisset. Downloads are "an early indicator that there is something there — a certain fan base is going to engage with a certain artist." Five months later, Warner Nashville announced it had signed the Flagstaff, Ariz., singer-songwriter.

"It's part of the list of tools we employ to move on the chart," Foisset adds. "While it isn't crucial to our day-to-day decision-making or overall revenue, this is something that still can be important when we're building a story for a song or a developing artist."

Downloads generally appeal to an older crowd that prefers ownership to the song-renting nature of YouTube or Spotify. But younger K-pop and Taylor Swift fans respond to exclusive deals, like Swift's 12-hour January sale of limited-edition digital copies of *Midnights* with exclusive cover art. Christine Barnum, chief revenue officer of distributor CD Baby, calls the format a piece of virtual merchandise that is "a much more approachable version" of a non-fungible token.

So far, though, that hasn't connected with listeners the way that physical formats have of late. According to the RIAA, cassette sales jumped 28.3% from 2021 to 2022, from 343,000 to 440,000. Vinyl's growth has been well documented, rising 847% from 2012 to 2022. Year-over-year growth decelerated in 2022 to a modest 4.3%, rising from 41.7 million in 2021 to 43.5 million.

Overall sales of physical product are dwarfed by streaming, which accounted for 84% of the industry's total 2021 revenue of $12.4 billion. But revenue for physical sales reversed a decline during the pandemic, rising in 2020 for the first time in 16 years from $1.1 billion in 2019 to $1.2 billion in 2020, then continuing to grow to $1.7 billion in 2021.

Fans can't hang downloads on their walls, though, and the format continues to slide. "Not very important," says Ben Swanson, COO of top independent Secretly Group. "We still track it and sell it, but we don't use that data meaningfully in budget discussions or anything like that."

While Miley Cyrus' "Flowers" has topped *Billboard*'s Digital Song Sales chart for the past five weeks, Jonathan Daniel, manager at Crush Music, says the revenue is not very significant for a pop star on her level. The download success, though, is useful to show that an older audience has come around to the former teen star's work. "It's a relative gauge of a slightly older listener — more of a [adult top 40] or adult contemporary format than, say, a pop or alternative-format listener," says Daniel, who also represents Sia, Green Day, Lorde and Fall Out Boy.

Amazon and Apple representatives didn't respond to requests for comment. Several online retailers, however, still emphasize downloads. Beatport's customer base relies on them for its DJ sets — its download sales have increased by 5% to 10% every year since 2017, according to CEO Robb McDaniels. "We're probably one of the only places in the world where download sales are increasing," he says. "I think the labels are happy to see that."

Barnum adds that downloads remain crucially important for indie artists who make far less than Cyrus' level of revenue. "It's a great tool — 'I bought your download' as opposed to 'I played something on Spotify,' " she says. "Point zero-zero-zero-something cents versus a dollar." b

DYNAMIC RECORDS

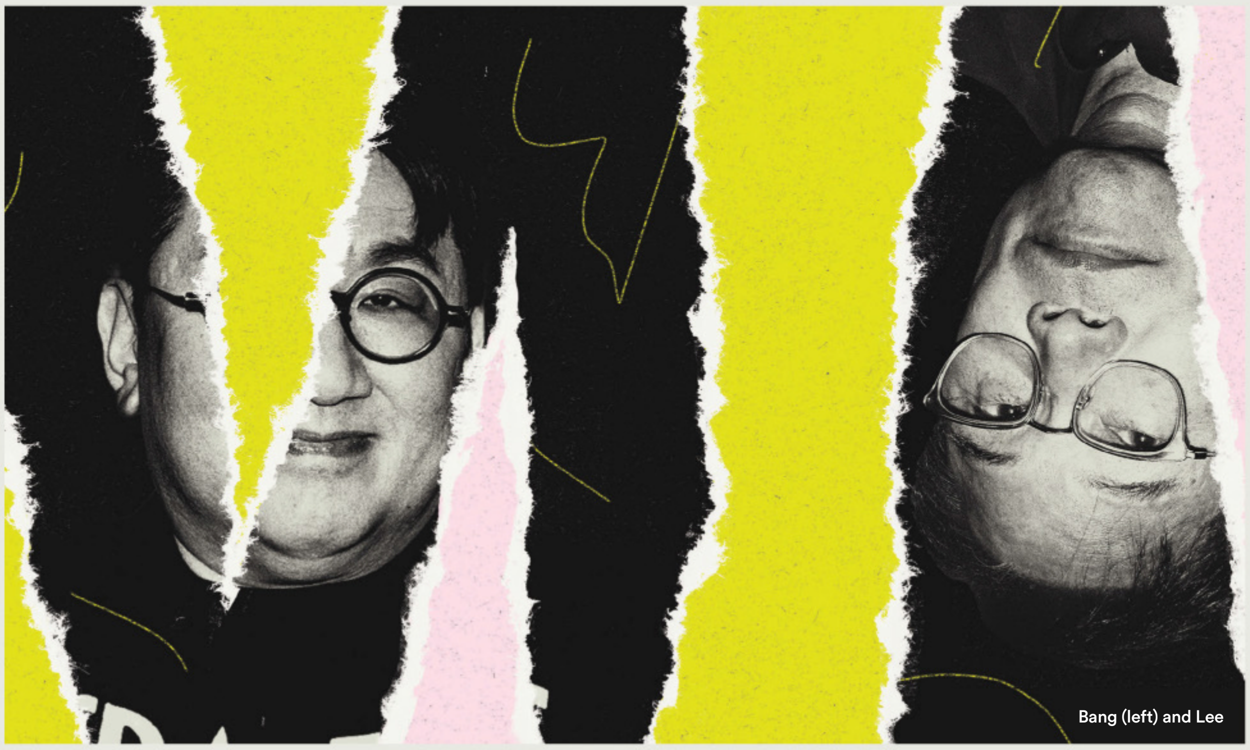
HOUSE OF NEW URBAN MUSIC

JAY WHEELER
CONEP

PROUDLY MADE IN PUERTO RICO

Middle East streaming service **Anghami** was sued for copyright infringement by **Reservoir** and **PopArabia**.

Jo Twist was named CEO of British music industry trade organization **BPI**.


Bang (left) and Lee

A K-POP 'SUCCESSION' DRAMA

One of the genre's original forces, SM Entertainment, is embroiled in a public battle involving its powerhouse founder and HYBE

BY JEYUP S. KWAAK AND GLENN PEOPLES

SEOUL — The bitter battle for control of K-pop's fabled agency SM Entertainment has spilled out publicly like an episode of HBO's *Succession*. K-pop's largest agency, HYBE — home to boy band BTS — is pitted against the management of SM, which for years was South Korea's dominant K-pop company. But as SM's Lee Soo-man sided with HYBE against the company he founded, a corporate shakeup has turned into a battle royale.

SM sought to maintain its independence through a partnership with Kakao, a South Korean internet giant that has acquired several entertainment agencies. In February, Kakao said it would buy a 9.05% stake in SM — against the wishes of Lee, SM's charismatic founder and rock singer-turned-mogul, whose equity in SM allowed him to challenge the purchase in court. About a week later, Lee — a controversial figure who helped build the K-pop business over the last three decades but has been convicted of embezzlement in the past — privately approached HYBE founder and chairman Bang Si-hyuk, offering to sell about 80% of his shares to HYBE, with an option to sell the remaining chunk at a later date, according to a person with direct knowledge of the matter. HYBE now has a 15.8% stake, making it the largest shareholder. Since then, the companies have traded almost daily salvos.

After a March 3 provisionary injunction upheld Lee's court challenge, Kakao announced it had canceled its investment in SM. HYBE is appealing to SM shareholders to back its board nominees and vision for the company. SM sees the move as a hostile takeover and is asking shareholders to appoint independent directors. The clock is ticking before a March 31 annual shareholder meeting.

Both HYBE and SM have grand ambitions to expand K-pop and take on the major labels globally. HYBE increased its revenue 125% to 1.78 billion won ($1.41 billion) from 2020 to 2022, largely by acquiring Ithaca Holdings in 2021 for $1.05 billion and giving its founder, Scooter Braun, the reins to its U.S. operations, HYBE America. In February, HYBE America made its first major move, acquiring Atlanta-based hip-hop company Quality Control Music for $300 million.

SM hopes to more than double its 2022 revenue of 850 billion won ($644 million) to 1.8 trillion won ($1.36 billion) by 2025 through a mix of partnerships and acquisitions, which include acquiring a U.S. management company and, by the second half of 2024, launching its first U.S.-based artist. "Our plan is not limited to local activities of Korean artists," co-CEO Tak Young-jun said in a Feb. 23 video.

But SM — minus its powerful founder — doesn't intend to take the world stage with HYBE's help. It had envisioned Kakao as its preferred partner in a mission it has said it will still push forward with — dubbed "SM 3.0" — to expand outside of Korea and build outposts in Japan, Southeast Asia and the Americas.

A HYBE acquisition of a controlling interest in SM could potentially face regulatory scrutiny from South Korea's Fair Trade Commission since it exceeds 15% of SM's stock ownership. In 2022, HYBE sold 26.8% of albums sold in Korea, and SM 19.1%, according to Korea chart company Circle Chart.

Though few had predicted such a dramatic unraveling, SM was overdue for a transformation. Once the leading K-pop innovator, SM has debuted just one completely new act, Aespa, in the last five years. It continues to operate through a single pipeline with Lee at the helm of artist management and production, while rivals like HYBE and JYP Entertainment have diversified their portfolios, relying on multiple teams that produce more acts with more independence.

SM's shares have been chronically undervalued, industry observers say, due to an arrangement where the company paid producing fees to a separate entity owned by Lee. SM paid Lee 24 billion won ($18.1 million) in 2021, equivalent to more than a quarter of SM's operating profit that year.

The board of directors, packed with Lee allies, allowed the practice to continue for years, until Align Partners Capital Management, a private equity firm, led a shareholder revolt last year. Lee, who now holds about 3% of SM shares, appears headed out the door. HYBE and SM say that his role will be reduced if not completely phased out.

"It's hard to put up a resistance in Korean culture," Lee Changhwan, CEO of Align Partners, says about the difficulty in overriding a founder and company's biggest shareholder. "The governance structure has to go through fundamental changes."

South Korean stocks are often undervalued, analysts say, since some companies can seem to be managed for the benefit of founders and families to the detriment of general shareholders. Still, in the HYBE-SM power struggle, SM shareholders appear to have won either way: The March 7 share price of 149,700 won ($113.84) is up over 116% since Oct. 14.

The 70-year-old Lee, who founded SM in 1995, has been credited with making K-pop what it is today. In 2000, SM became the first K-pop agency to list its shares publicly.

Lee's artistic vision and drive didn't make up for the company's corporate governance problems, however. Shareholders have in recent years slammed SM for losses from nonmusic businesses such as a winery and restaurants, while Lee was still getting his producer's fees. Several SM acts have seen members leave acrimoniously over what they called harsh training and "slave contracts," resulting in government intervention, including shorter contracts for K-pop trainees and stars.

In 2002, Lee made headlines when he fled the country to escape prosecution while facing embezzlement allegations. He eventually surrendered to Korean authorities and was convicted for siphoning off company funds during a recapitalization round. (In 2007, he received a presidential pardon.) SM has also paid fines for tax evasion, most recently in 2021. In a statement to *Billboard*, HYBE says its SM acquisition was made "following research on the corporate fundamentals, including publicly disclosed information about SM." **b**

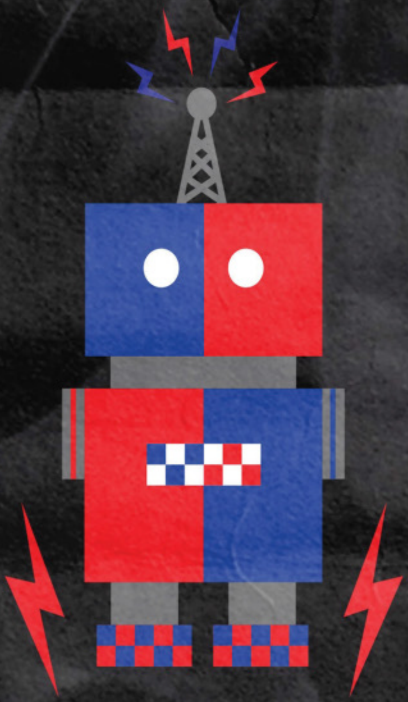
BANG: RIVER CALLAWAY FOR PMC. LEE: HAN MYUNG-GU/WIREIMAGE.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOAN WONG

LA

BASE

MUSIC GROUP



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JUAN LUIS MORERA “WISIN” - FOUNDER / CEO LA BASE MUSIC GROUP

MADE IN CAYEY

From The Desk Of...
Ebonie Ward

CHAIRWOMAN/CEO, 11TH & CO

BY GAIL MITCHELL   PHOTOGRAPHED BY YURI HASEGAWA

WHILE A PARTNER and manager at Emagen Entertainment Group, Ebonie Ward watched #MeToo gain momentum and #TheShowMustBePaused bring the music industry to a halt in the name of racial justice. In the wake of these movements, "there have been all these indications of putting women of color into leadership positions," she says, but little in the way of sustained action.

"I've seen a lot of Black women, especially in hip-hop and R&B, who are the backbones at many companies. I've also seen a lot of women who are actually running these companies, but they're still not the face," she adds. "It was time to do something different.

"During COVID-19, I realized that I was limiting myself by not being forward-moving or thinking out of the box," Ward recalls. So after five years at Emagen, she has opened the doors to her own full-service management firm, 11th & Co (pronounced "co") — the first management company to be led entirely by women and, specifically, Black women.

In addition to Ward, who's chairwoman/CEO, 11th & Co's seven-member executive team includes CFO Alexandria Kindle, chief marketing officer Jenna Magee-Tyson, chief legal adviser Zita Brack, executive vp of lifestyle promotions Imaine Molo, executive vp of tour marketing Krishna Lee and head of A&R operations and administration Asha "DJ Osh" Holland.

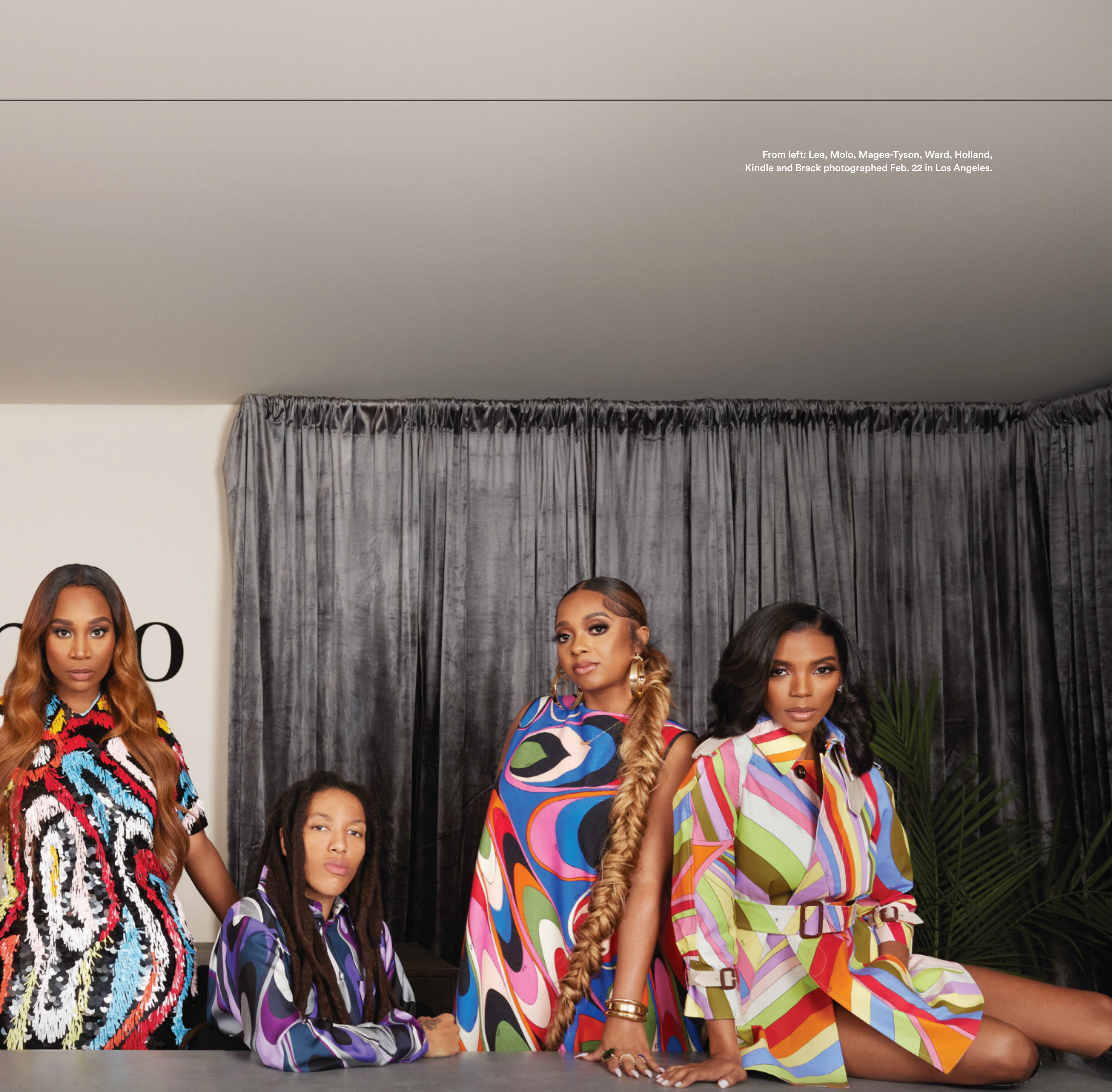
Based in Atlanta with plans to open a Los Angeles office, the 11th & Co roster includes Ward's former Emagen clients Future, Gunna and Flo Milli, as well as its newest client, NBA player James Harden. "In its own way, sports is very similar to music because a lot of athletes want to get into lifestyle," she says. "They want marketing."

What was the inspiration for your firm's name?

My birthday is Sept. 11. And my executive board, staff and client roster now total 11. I've always had this synergy around the number 11; it has always felt powerful to me. Plus, I wanted something timeless. Something that would make people ask more about it.

What is your vision for the firm?

I want to do something that is very unorthodox, not one-dimensional. In addition to our music clients, we've just added James Harden of the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers. James has an agent with whom I work very closely, but I'm more like James' lifestyle manager. He's his own brand. I went to him and asked if he'd thought about life after basketball. I wanted to help him understand and realize that he needed to pay attention to how he's perceived off the court. People



From left: Lee, Molo, Magee-Tyson, Ward, Holland, Kindle and Brack photographed Feb. 22 in Los Angeles.

don't know his story. He's very humble and gracious. He's a board member and minority investor in Saks Fifth Avenue's e-commerce business [known simply as Saks] and is doing things in the alcoholic beverage world with wine and tequila. And there are other things that we're helping him build and navigate.

What are the challenges of being a Black, female C-suite executive in the music industry?
The first challenge is to be received and respected. Even working with my previous partner [Emagen founder/CEO Anthony Saleh], I've walked into rooms and not been addressed, let alone been respected, for knowing this business inside and out. You don't want to say you didn't get a deal because you're a woman. And you don't want to use your Black card. That's something a lot of women in this business have to deal with. At the same time, you have to have a level of stamina to sustain yourself through the joys and pains, to be able to accept the word "no," which can feel defeating. Many of us women don't protect or advocate for each other. When someone invites you to something, go; get someone's phone number and call them. Get real information and learn from it. Please tell me when I'm wrong or I didn't do enough. And then we must be able to take that information gracefully. More women need to do that for each other, especially Black women, because we can be each other's harshest critics.

Why are there still so few female managers and C-suite executives — especially those of color — in the industry?
More work needs to be done. Aside from holding other people accountable, we need to hold ourselves accountable. As soon as everything came back after the show was paused, a lot of those efforts stopped. Going back into our offices, we need to still have that same hunger and that same fight to hold the industry accountable for what they said they were championing.

In the wake of Gunna's plea deal before the Young Stoner Life Records RICO trial, does he have new music projects in the pipeline?
Because of the ongoing trial, I really can't speak to that. But the time will come. Having been incarcerated for seven months, he's really just getting acclimated to being out of a cell. Sometimes people need to give people an opportunity just to be human. In the meantime, myself and all of my clients have signed [300 Elektra Entertainment chairman/CEO] Kevin Liles' "Art on Trial: Protect Black Art" petition. People need to understand that this issue affects not just the people who are dealing with it personally, but all of us. It's a very serious issue that we need everyone's support to rally behind. b

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Full Speed Ahead

Mimi Webb has been a consistent hit-maker in her native United Kingdom — but with her debut album, she's ready for the world to know her name

BY LYNDSEY HAVENS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROSALINE SHAHNAVAZ

Webb photographed Feb. 24 at zēphyr in London.

Styling by Lauren Anne Groves
Versace T-shirt, dress, pants and boa; Justine Clenquet necklace; Shaun Leane, Bold Studio and Dosisg6c rings.

Coperni jacket, Justine Clenquet earrings.

IN FEBRUARY, Mimi Webb brought her mother to the 2023 BRIT Awards, where she was nominated for best new artist. She lost to Wet Leg, but days later, Webb was still beaming over meeting Harry Styles at the ceremony instead of being fazed by the defeat — as she saw it, she had too much more to look forward to.

On March 3, the charismatic rising pop star released her debut album, *Amelia*, which includes pop radio hits like "House on Fire" and "Red Flags." The 12-track project, which juxtaposes power-pop songs with catchy confessionals, is the culmination of a yearslong plan that prioritized career development and patience — and rewarded Webb's drive.

"I always loved being center stage," the 22-year-old born Amelia Webb recalls of growing up in Canterbury, England. She started music lessons when she was 12 and became active in her school's band nights. "That's where I was able to grow more as a musician and find that love for it. That's when I decided, 'Right. I'm going to go for it.' [There was] no backup plan."

By 16, Webb moved out to attend Brighton Music College. She didn't stay long: That same year, she scored a manager in music and tech entrepreneur Rob Ronaldson, who was quick to set up studio time and label meetings in Los Angeles. "I just didn't have time to do college. I had to drop out," says Webb, speaking quickly as if to match the pace of her ascent. "I learned so much to the point where I took things into my own hands and went out there and just did it."

From the start, Ronaldson foresaw Webb's cross-continental appeal and aimed for a record deal abroad rather than signing in the United Kingdom. The approach aligned with Webb's own goal: "Break worldwide."

In 2019, she signed a deal with Epic Records, forming an immediate bond with Ezekiel "Zeke" Lewis, the label's executive vp of A&R. And in 2020, Best Friends Music's Brandon Goodman signed on as Webb's stateside co-manager. Still, she continued to grow her domestic fan base, landing a U.K. hit every year since breaking first on TikTok with the impassioned "Before I Go," a song Charli D'Amelio used to soundtrack a video on the app. (D'Amelio soon after helped Webb create her own account.)

And in 2021, "Good Without," from Webb's debut EP, *Seven Shades of Heartbreak*, crossed the pond and became her first entry on *Billboard*'s Mainstream Top 40 chart, followed by "House on Fire" in 2022. She started 2023 completing a hat trick, as the rousing "Red Flags" became her third entry on the list, peaking at No. 29. The success was steady, but to Webb, who was writing incessantly and building her following on social media, it was a whirlwind. "When I look back, I had no clue what I wanted to really do as an artist — till now."

On *Amelia*, Webb introduces the world to her two selves: the chill homebody Amelia and the pop powerhouse Mimi. "With this album, I really wanted to get the mixture of both [my] worlds — get those ballads in, but also get the uptempo, fun songs in there as well," she says.

Webb officially started working on *Amelia* last April, finishing the bulk of it in under six months, she estimates. "I had a lot of songs in the bag," she says, noting that she wrote the wishful "See You Soon" four years ago, while she co-wrote newer songs like "Red Flags," "Roles Reversed" and "Last Train to London" in one week with Connor and Riley McDonough (who last year scored a Billboard Hot 100 top 10 with Joji's "Glimpse of Us").

And even though Webb is embracing her offstage persona, she's grateful for her foresight in creating a moniker, comparing it to a wall. "I think it was a way of protecting [myself]," she says, "and also feeling that confidence to go onstage and not worry about what's going to happen."

She admires peers like Tate McRae, whom she opened for on tour, and praises the dominant onstage presence of Dua Lipa, an artist she has "completely fallen in love with" — and one with whom she shares a milestone. "Red Flags" made Webb the first British female artist since Lipa (who was also a U.K. star before crossing over to the United States) to chart two singles in the top 15 of the U.K. Official Singles Chart before releasing a debut album. "I've taken a lot of inspiration from how she has done the steps and built from scratch, doing the small shows to the big arenas," Webb says.

That slow climb is exactly how Webb and her team have arrived at this moment: a hit single leading into a debut album leading into a U.K. and European headlining tour. What will follow, the artist hopes, is U.S. stardom.

"For the last two-and-a-half years, we have been focused on the recording and artist-development process," Epic chairman/CEO Sylvia Rhone says. "By releasing music and content consistently, coupled with touring, it has allowed her to mature as an artist and build a loyal and global audience."

"I'm definitely excited for people to get to know Amelia and to tell the story of growing up and how intense everything feels," says Webb. "I just want people to really get to know me more as an artist — *and* as a person."

BEHIND THE HIT

Sabrina Carpenter's "Nonsense"

DURING ONE OF the sessions for *Emails I Can't Send*, Sabrina Carpenter's 2022 album full of post-heartbreak contemplations, she hit a mental wall. "We were writing, and I was like, 'This isn't how I'm actually feeling right now,' " the singer recalls. "I had to get outside of my head." Over the next two hours, Carpenter and co-writer Steph Jones created "Nonsense," a cheeky, sumptuous rhythmic-pop track about being so flustered around someone that she gets tongue-tied. But then she shrugged off the song, figuring it didn't fit with the tone of the album, and nearly left it off the tracklist altogether. "That laid-back approach," she reflects now, "is what I think actually made it special."

Much like Carpenter, 23, listeners didn't immediately latch on to "Nonsense" — but since the July release of *Emails*, the song has turned into the album's biggest hit. Late last year, a sped-up version went viral, prompting Carpenter to release an official accelerated take. "There's something addictive about hearing a song sped up," she says. "It gives it new life and more energy." She then uploaded a holiday version of "Nonsense" to streaming services, building toward its breakthrough in 2023, beginning with a highly choreographed performance on the Jan. 4 episode of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, as well as a TikTok dance routine pegged to the second verse.

The single has reached a No. 56 high on the Billboard Hot 100 and earned 77.2 million U.S. on-demand streams through March 2, according to Luminate. It has also given Carpenter — who released four albums on Hollywood Records before making her Island Records debut with *Emails* — her best-performing pop radio hit, with four weeks in the top 20 of the Mainstream Top 40 chart.

There's still more "Nonsense" to come: Carpenter confirms that a remix with another artist is on the way, potentially in time for the March 16 kickoff to her headlining tour. No matter how high the song climbs, Carpenter says that the unexpected reaction to it has been extremely gratifying. "When you're seen for things that feel so close to who you are at your deepest, darkest self, it's a beautiful thing."

—JASON LIPSHUTZ

CARPENTER: GILBERT FLORES FOR BILLBOARD

Rammstein in Prague in 2022.

INSIDE LOOK

Burning Up

How one man took his obsession with fire to some of the biggest stages in the world

BY STEVE KNOPPER

RAMMSTEIN: MATTHIAS MATTHIES. GAGA: KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES. MEET ME @ THE ALTAR: JONATHAN WEINER.

WHILE REHEARSING for its 2013 Las Vegas residency, Mötley Crüe instructed Nicolai Sabottka, its new pyrotechnics specialist, to set the venue on fire — walls, ceiling, floor, everything. But when flames exploded behind Tommy Lee's head, the drummer, believing *he* was on fire, freaked out and ran off. Everyone laughed. Lee returned and demanded of Sabottka: "What the fuck is going on here?" To which an unfazed Sabottka replied: "We tried to warn you."

Sabottka, CEO of Berlin-based FFP Spezialeffekte und Veranstaltungslogistik (which translates to "Special Effects and Event Logistics"), has spent the past 26 years mastering the art of blowing stuff up at concerts while ensuring everybody remains safe. Although he earned a degree in pyrotechnics at a Dresden school specializing in explosives technology, his true studies came from working with Rammstein, the electro-metal band known for towering flames and violent explosions.

Lady Gaga in Stockholm on last year's Chromatica Ball Tour.

He joined Rammstein's crew in 1997 as a tour manager, monitoring rhythm guitarist Paul Landers. "He would just put gasoline onstage and set it on fire," Sabottka recalls. "We thought, 'That's not a good idea.' " Over time, Sabottka learned to be safer and more intentional, innovating flamethrowers attached to guitars and face masks, as well as an exploding backpack for frontman Till Lindemann. One of his proudest inventions was to shoot flames up the delay towers used to spread audio through a stadium.

"I can text him and go, 'I have this idea to have a wrecking ball, and it hits a car and the car explodes,' " says Robert Long, Mötley Crüe's production manager. "And 10 minutes later, I'll get a video of him experimenting with something." A favorite tool is lycopodium, a yellowish powder that creates giant flames that are relatively easy to control.

Adds Landers: "The small, student-looking guy [is] now a serious, professional deadly weapon. He's a big, big part of our show." For Rammstein's upcoming European stadium tour, Sabottka is most excited to make the pyro even "more impressive."

His obsession began when he was a kid, hunting mice with friends in an open field near his home in Germany where he "managed to set the entire area on fire," he says. Now 57, Sabottka and FFP have expanded beyond the Rammstein universe, working with reliably pyro-friendly hard-rock bands like Mötley Crüe and KISS, as well as pop stars such as Lady Gaga on her Chromatica Ball Tour and Taylor Swift and Sam Smith at the BRIT Awards (in 2013 and this February, respectively). Today, FFP has 70 employees worldwide across the company's offices in Berlin, Los Angeles and London. Using artists' own ideas as a guide, Sabottka and his staff are constantly tinkering.

"They know how to take things right up to the limit," says LeRoy Bennett, production designer for the Chromatica Ball Tour. "They're super safety-conscious, but they'll do things that are pretty intense."

As Sabottka says: "I just like to set things on fire. It's surprising I'm still alive." ◼

From left: Juarez, Victoria and Campbell.

Q & A

First Dance

POP-PUNK TRIO Meet Me @ the Altar broke out during the pandemic as a vibrant newcomer to the scene — and has since performed at Lollapalooza and When We Were Young and in March kicked off its first headlining tour. Now, its members — vocalist Edith Victoria and guitarist/bassist Téa Campbell, 22, and drummer Ada Juarez, 24 — are eager to expand on the genre they grew up listening to with their debut album, *Past // Present // Future*, released March 10 on Fueled by Ramen.

What conversations inspired the sonic direction of this debut?

VICTORIA We wanted for it to be experimental. If fans end up liking those songs, we have so many different avenues we can take for the second [album] — and not have our fan base be so confused as to where it came from.

CAMPBELL We didn't want to trap ourselves in the box of genre, which a lot of artists do and a lot of fans inflict on bands, too. It's our art at the end of the day, and we want to make the music that makes us happy. If other people like it, that is great. But if they don't, it's still music for us. A band who did it perfectly was Paramore: Their records all sound different, but it's still them.

Were there times when you thought the project was finished before realizing it needed adjustments?

JUAREZ So many times.

CAMPBELL We thought we were done in April and didn't get done until November. In the beginning, there were *so* many swaps because we weren't sure of what specific sound we wanted this album to have. As we had more sessions and fell in love with songs, we started to really understand. Those would beat out some of the other ones that we didn't really feel fit that cohesive vibe. We had a last-minute session, wrote a couple more songs and had to put them on the album.

The first line on album opener "Say It (To My Face)" addresses being an industry plant. Why did you decide to kick it off with that?

VICTORIA We wanted to start this album rollout with an in-your-face moment, and that song definitely is. We've heard it so much since signing to the label, just people saying shit for no reason. We get that more now than I think we ever have.

CAMPBELL In between [our 2021 EP] *Model Citizen* and "Say It," we had all that time to see what people are saying. It was like: "We've been gone for a while, but we're back. We're going to address it, and we're moving on."

You're on your first headlining tour after supporting Green Day, Coheed and Cambria, The Used and more. What have you learned from those bands?

CAMPBELL To be able to tour with bands who have been doing this for so long, we really studied those kind of acts because they alter their songs around the show and alter their show around the songs. It makes you think, "Oh, I could be doing this" — whether it be a clapping thing or whatever — in our own songs. We tried to absorb as much as we could.

—JOSH GLICKSMAN

WOMEN IN MUSIC 2023

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAMI DRASIN

THERE'S SOMETHING magical about watching women receive what they deserve," said Dove Cameron backstage at the 2023 Billboard Women in Music event, held March 1 in Los Angeles. The singer-songwriter, who presented the Impact award to her friend Becky G, attended alongside a star-studded crowd of honorees, fellow presenters and a sold-out YouTube Theater filled with fans screaming for their favorites. And the volume in the room grew thunderous for artists like Woman of the Year SZA (whose award was presented by Coi Leray), Visionary Lana Del Rey (presented by 2022 Woman of the Year Olivia Rodrigo) and Icon Ivy Queen (introduced by Bad Bunny, in a surprise appearance). As the evening went on, host Quinta Brunson (creator/star of *Abbott Elementary*) kept the laughs coming, while performances and speeches by Breakthrough act TWICE, Rising Star Doechii, Powerhouse Latto, Rulebreaker Lainey Wilson and Becky G were equal parts powerful and poignant. Plus, Producer of the Year Rosalía and Chartbreaker Kim Petras celebrated a pair of firsts: Rosalía was the first recipient of her award while Petras became the first trans artist to earn a Women in Music honor. Petras danced and cheered for TWICE from her table and backstage gushed over Del Rey, telling her, "All the cool people anywhere only listen to you." Rodrigo hopped in a photo with TWICE, and just before leaving, Chloe Bailey ran to take a selfie with SZA. "I look up to every single woman in this room, they're so inspiring," SZA said, taking the night in. "I just want to do more for others so that I feel like I even deserve this."

—LYNDSEY HAVENS

"It feels unbelievable," said **SZA** of her Woman of the Year honor. "I'm just grateful that anybody saw [this] in me at all."

SZA

Petras

“Being a Rulebreaker means that I have gone against the grain and done things my way,” said **Wilson**. “I have a really hard time being anything other than myself.”

Wilson

Rosalía

Ivy Queen

Cameron

“Shout out to my team that have helped me gain the knowledge and experience to even become a Powerhouse,” said **Latto**. “It’s deeper than music. It’s how you use your platform and success to bring others up with you.” ▶

Del Rey

Latto

Doechii

◀ “Can I curse?” asked **Doechii** when thinking of what her Rising Star honor means. She then declared: “It means to be the next top cunt.”

TWICE

Rodrigo

Leray

Becky G

Brunson

"I've never really hosted before, and what a wonderful event for it to be," said **Brunson**. "It was a gut yes ... I love music and I love women. A lot of hosting gigs are a gut no." ▶

Lil Yachty photographed Jan. 25
at Shio Studio in Brooklyn.

YACHTY ROCK

With his adventurous, psychedelic new album, *Let's Start Here*, **LIL YACHTY** has left mumble rap behind — and finally created a project he's proud of

BY LYNDSEY HAVENS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PETER ASH LEE

S**OMEONE HAS SPARKED** a blunt in the planetarium.

It may be a school night, but no one has come to the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, N.J., to learn. Instead, the hundreds of fans packed into the domed theater on Jan. 26 have come to hear Lil Yachty's latest album as he intended: straight through — and with an open mind. Or, as Yachty says with a mischievous smile: "I hope y'all took some shit."

For the next 57 minutes and 16 seconds, graphics of exploding spaceships, green giraffes and a quiet road through Joshua Tree National Park accompany Yachty's sonically divergent — and at this point, unreleased — fifth album, *Let's Start Here*. For a psychedelic rock project that plays like one long song, the visual aids not only help attendees embrace the bizarre, but also function as a road map for Yachty's far-out trip, signaling that there is, in fact, a tracklist.

It's a night the artist has arguably been waiting for his whole career — to finally release an album he feels proud of. An album that was, he says, made "from scratch" with all live instrumentation. An album that opens with a nearly seven-minute opus, "the BLACK seminole.," that he claims he had to fight most of his collaborative team to keep as one, not two songs. An album that, unlike his others, has few features and is instead rich with co-writers like Mac DeMarco, Nick Hakim, Alex G and members of MGMT, Unknown Mortal Orchestra and Chairlift. An album he believes will finally earn him the respect and recognition he has always sought.

"I did what I really wanted to do, which was create a body of work that reflected *me*," says a soft-spoken Yachty the day before his listening event. "My idea was for this album to be a journey: Press play and fall into a void."

Sitting in a Brooklyn studio in East Williamsburg not far from where he made most of *Let's Start Here* in neighboring Greenpoint, it's clear he has been waiting to talk about this project in depth for some time. Yachty is an open book, willing to answer anything — and share any opinion. (Especially on the slice of pizza he has been brought, which he declares "tastes like ass.") Perhaps his most controversial take at the moment? “Fuck any of the albums I dropped before this one.”

His desire to move on from his past is understandable. When Yachty entered the industry in his mid-teens with his 2016 major-label debut, the *Lil Boat* mixtape, featuring the breakout hit “One Night,” he found that along with fame came sailing the internet’s choppy waters. Skeptics often took him to task for not knowing — or caring, maybe — about rap’s roots, and he never shied away from sharing hot takes on Twitter. With his willingness and ability to straddle pop and hip-hop, Yachty produced music he once called “bubble-gum trap” (he has since denounced that phrase) that polarized audiences and critics. Meanwhile, his nonchalant delivery got him labeled as a mumble rapper — another identifier he was never fond of because it felt dismissive of his talent.

“I came into music in a time where rap was real hardcore, it was real street,” he says. “And a bunch of us kids came in with colorful hair and dressing different and basically said, ‘Move out the way, old fucks. We on some other shit.’ I was young and I didn’t really give a fuck, so I did do things that may have led people to the assumptions that I was a mumble rapper or a SoundCloud kid or I don’t appreciate the history of hip-hop. But to be honest, I’ve always been so much more than just hip-hop.

“There’s a lot of kids who haven’t heard any of my references,” he continues. “They don’t know anything about Bon Iver or Pink Floyd or Black Sabbath or James Brown. I wanted to show people a different side of me — and that I can do anything, most importantly.”

Let’s Start Here is proof. Growing up in Atlanta, the artist born Miles McCollum was heavily influenced by his father, a photographer who introduced him to all kinds of sounds. Yachty, once easily identifiable by his bright red braids, found early success by posting songs like “One Night” to SoundCloud, catching the attention of Kevin “Coach K” Lee, co-founder/COO of Quality Control Music, now home to Migos, Lil Baby and City Girls. In 2015, Coach K began managing Yachty, who in summer 2016 signed a joint-venture deal with Motown, Capitol Records and Quality Control.

“Yachty was me when I was 18 years old, when I signed him. He was actually me,” says Coach K today. (In 2021, Adam Kluger, whose clients include Bhad Bhabie, began co-managing Yachty.) “All the eclectic, different things, we shared that with each other. He had been wanting to make this album from the first day we signed him. But you know — coming as a hip-hop artist, you have to play the game.”

Yachty played it well. To date, he has charted 17 songs on the Billboard Hot 100, including two top 10 hits for his features on DRAM’s melodic 2016 smash “Broccoli” and Kyle’s 2017 pop-rap track “iSpy.” His third-highest-charting entry arrived unexpectedly last year: the 93-second “Poland,” a track Yachty recorded in about 10 minutes where his warbly vocals more closely resemble singing than rapping. (*Let’s Start Here* collaborator SADPONY saw “Poland” as a temperature check that proved “people are going to like this Yachty.”)

Beginning with 2016’s *Lil Boat* mixtape, all eight of Yachty’s major-label-released albums and mixtapes have charted on the Billboard 200. Three have entered the top 10, including *Let’s Start Here*, which debuted and peaked at No. 9. And while Yachty has only scored one No. 1 album before (*Teenage Emotions* topped Rap Album Sales), *Let’s Start Here* debuted atop three genre charts: Top Rock & Alternative Albums, Top Rock Albums and Top Alternative Albums.

“It feels good to know that people in that world received this so well,” says Motown Records vp of A&R Gelareh Rouzbehani. “I think it’s a testament to Yachty going in and saying, ‘Fuck what everyone thinks. I’m going to create something that I’ve always wanted to make — and let us hope the world fucking loves it.’ ”

Yachty says he was already confident about the album, but after playing it for several of his peers and heroes — including Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Post Malone, Drake, Cardi B, Kid Cudi, A$AP Rocky and Tyler, The Creator — “their reactions boosted me.”

Yet despite *Let’s Start Here*’s many high-profile supporters, some longtime detractors and fans alike were quick to criticize certain aspects of it, from its art — Yachty quote-tweeted one remark, succinctly replying, “shut up” — to the music itself. Once again, he found himself facing another tidal wave of discourse. But this time, he was ready to ride it. “This release,” Kluger says, “gave him a lot of confidence.”

“I was always kind of nervous to put out music, but now I’m on some other shit,” Yachty says. “It was a lot of self-assessing and being very real about not being happy with where I was musically, knowing I’m better than where I am. Because the shit I was making did not add up to the shit I listened to.

“I just wanted more,” he continues. “I want to be remembered. I want to be respected.”

“I WANTED TO SHOW PEOPLE A DIFFERENT SIDE OF ME — AND THAT I CAN DO ANYTHING, MOST IMPORTANTLY.” —Lil Yachty

LAST SPRING, LIL YACHTY gathered his family, collaborators and team at famed Texas studio complex Sonic Ranch.

“I remember I got there at night and drove down because this place is like 30 miles outside El Paso,” Coach K says. “I walked in the room and just saw all these instruments and shit, and the vibe was just so ill. And I just started smiling. All the producers were in the room, his assistant, his dad. Yachty comes in, puts the album on. We got to the second song, and I told everybody, ‘Stop the music.’ I walked over to him and just said, ‘Man, give me a hug.’ I was like, ‘Yachty, I am so proud of you.’ He came into the game bold, but [to make] this album, you have to be *very* bold. And to know that he finally did it, it was overwhelming.”

SADPONY (aka Jeremiah Raisen) — who executive-produced *Let’s Start Here* and, in doing so, spent nearly eight straight months with Yachty — says the time at Sonic Ranch was the perfect way to cap off the months of tunnel vision required while making the album in Brooklyn. “That was new alone,” says Yachty. “I’ve recorded every album in Atlanta at [Quality Control]. That was the first time I recorded away from home. First time I recorded with a new engineer,” Miles B.A. Robinson, a Saddle Creek artist.

And while they did put the finishing touches on the album in Texas, they also let loose. “We had a fucking grand old time,” SADPONY says. “We had about 50 people all throughout these houses and were driving in these unregistered trucks, like cartel trucks, around this crazy pecan farm. Obviously, we were all having some fun making this psychedelic record.”

Yachty couldn’t wait to put it out, and says he turned it in “a long time ago. I think it was just label shit and trying to figure out the right time to release it.” For Coach K, it was imperative to have the physical product ready on release date, given that Yachty had made “an experience” of an album. And lately, most pressing plants have an average turnaround time of six to eight months.

Fans, however, were impatient. On Christmas, one month before *Let’s Start Here* would arrive, the album leaked online. It was dubbed *Sonic Ranch*. “Everyone was home with their families, so no one could pull it off the internet,” recalls Yachty. “That was really depressing and frustrating.”

Then, weeks later, the album art, tracklist and release date also leaked. “My label made a mistake and sent preorders to Amazon too early, and [the site] posted it,” Yachty says. “So I wasn’t able to do the actual rollout for my album that I wanted to. Nothing was a secret anymore. It was all out. I had a whole plan that I had to cancel.” He says the biggest loss was various videos he made to introduce and contextualize the project, all of which “were really weird … [But] I wasn’t introducing it anymore. People already knew.” Only one, called “Department of Mental Tranquility,” made it out, just days before the album.

Yachty says he wasn’t necessarily seeking a mental escape before making *Let’s Start Here*, but confesses that acid gave him one anyway. “I guess maybe the music went along with it,” he says. The album title changed four or five times, he says, from *Momentary Bliss* (“It was meant to take you away from reality … where you’re truly listening”) to *180 Degrees* (“Because it’s the complete opposite of anything I’ve ever done, but people were like, ‘It’s too on the nose’ ”) to, ultimately, *Let’s Start Here* — the best way, he decided, to succinctly summarize where he was as an artist: a seven-year veteran, but at 25 years old, still eager to begin a new chapter.

He dug into his less obvious influences: In 2017, he listened to Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon* for the first time. “I think that was the last time I was like, ‘*Whoa*.’ You know?” He believes Frank Ocean’s *Blonde* is “one of the best albums of all time” and cites Tame Impala’s *Currents* as another project that stopped him in his tracks. All were fuel to his fire.

Taking inspiration from *Dark Side*, Yachty relied on three women’s voices throughout the album, enlisting Fousheé, Justine Skye and Diana Gordon. Otherwise, guest vocals are spare. Daniel Caesar features on album closer “Reach the Sunshine.,” while the late Bob Ross (of *The Joy of Painting* fame) has a historic posthumous feature on “We Saw the Sun!”

SET DESIGN BY JACOB BURSTEIN AT MHS ARTISTS

Rouzbehani tells *Billboard* that Ross' estate declined Yachty's request at first: "I think a big concern of theirs was that Yachty is known as a rapper, and Bob Ross and his brand are very clean. They didn't want to associate with anything explicit." But Yachty was adamant, and Rouzbehani played the track for Ross' team and also sent the entire album's lyrics to set the group at ease. "With a lot of back-and-forth, we got the call," she says. "Yachty is the first artist that has gotten a Bob Ross clearance in history."

From the start, Coach K believed *Let's Start Here* would open lots of doors for Yachty — and ultimately, other artists, too. Questlove may have said it best, posting the album art on Instagram with a lengthy caption that read in part: "this lp might be the most surprising transition of any music career I've witnessed in a min, especially under the umbrella of hip hop ... Shit like this (envelope pushing) got me hyped about music's future."

"People don't know where Yachty's going to go now, and I think that's the coolest shit, artistrywise," says SADPONY. "That's some Iggy Pop-, David Bowie-type shit. Where the mysteriousness of being an artist is back."

RECENTLY, LIL YACHTY held auditions for an all-women touring band. "It was an experience for like Simon Cowell or Randy [Jackson]," he says, offering a simple explanation for the choice: "In my life, women are superheroes."

And according to Yachty, pulling off his show will take superhuman strength: "Because the show has to match the album. It has to be big." As eager as he was to release *Let's Start Here*, he's even more antsy to perform it live — but planning a tour, he says, required gauging the reaction to it. "This is so new for me, and to be quite honest with you, the label [didn't] know how [the album] would do," he says. "Also, I haven't dropped an album in like three years. So we don't even know how to plan a tour right now because it has been so long and my music is so different."

While Yachty's last full-length studio album, *Lil Boat 3*, arrived in 2020, he released the *Michigan Boy Boat* mixtape in 2021, a project as reverential of the state's flourishing hip-hop scenes in Detroit and Flint as *Let's Start Here* is of its psych-rock touchstones. And though he claims he doesn't do much with his days, his recent accomplishments, both musical and beyond, suggest otherwise. He launched his own cryptocurrency, YachtyCoin, at the end of 2020; signed his first artist, Draft Day, to his Concrete Boyz label at the start of 2021; invested in the Jewish dating app Lox Club; and launched his own line of frozen pizza, Yachty's Pizzeria, last September. (He has famously declared he has never eaten a vegetable; at his Jersey City listening event, there was an abundance of candy, doughnut holes and Frosted Brown Sugar Cinnamon Pop-Tarts.)

But there are only two things that seem to remotely excite him, first and foremost of which is being a father. As proud as he is of *Let's Start Here*, he says it comes in second to having his now 1-year-old daughter — though he says with a laugh that she "doesn't really give a fuck" about his music yet. "I haven't played [this album] for her, but her mom plays her my old stuff," he continues. "The mother of my child is Dominican and Puerto Rican, so she loves Selena — she plays her *a lot*. [We watch] the *Selena* movie with Jennifer Lopez a shit ton and a lot of Disney movie shit, like *Frozen*, *Lion King* and that type of vibe."

Aside from being a dad, he most cares about working with other artists. Recently, he flew eight of his biggest fans — most of whom he has kept in touch with for years — to Atlanta. He had them over, played *Let's Start Here*, took them to dinner and bowling, introduced them to his mom and dad, and then showed them a documentary he made for the album. (He's not sure if he'll release it.) One of the fans is an aspiring rapper; naturally, the two made a song together.

"I want to be Quincy Jones," Yachty near whispers. Last year, he co-produced a handful of tracks on the Drake and 21 Savage collaborative album *Her Loss*. And recently, he features on two Zack Bia tracks, one of which he produced, for Bia's upcoming album. Six months ago, he started living by himself for the first time. "I wish I did it sooner. I wake up, play video games and then I go to the studio all night until the morning," he says. "That's all I want to do." Since finishing *Let's Start Here*, Yachty claims he has made hundreds of songs, some experimenting with "electronic pop shit" that he can only describe as "tight."

Yachty wants to keep working with artists and producers outside of hip-hop, mentioning the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and even sharing his dream of writing a ballad for Elton John. ("I know I could write him a beautiful song.") With South Korean music company HYBE's recent purchase of Quality Control — a $300 million deal — Yachty's realm of possibility is bigger than ever.

But he's not ruling out his genre roots. Arguably, *Let's Start Here* was made for the peers and heroes he played it for first — and was inspired by hip-hop's chameleons. "I would love to do a project with Tyler [The Creator]," says Yachty. "He's the reason I made this album. He's the one who told me to do it, just go for it. He's so confident and I have so much respect for him because he takes me seriously, and he always has."

Yachty is now hoping everyone else does, too. "I just want people to understand I love this. This is not a joke to me. And I can stand with my chest out because I'm proud of something I created."

Lil Yachty will perform at Billboard*'s The Stage at South by Southwest, presented by Doritos, on March 16. Penske Media Corp. is the largest shareholder of SXSW; its brands are official media partners of SXSW.*

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Feid photographed Jan. 12 at Proper Studio in Miami.

GREEN LIGHT

He spent years becoming an in-demand songwriter for Latin's biggest names. But for **FEID**, unearthing his own artistic identity — and becoming a star in his own right — meant digging deeper (and picking a color)

BY JESSICA ROIZ **PHOTOGRAPHED BY DEVIN CHRISTOPHER**

A LEAKED ALBUM WAS the best thing that ever happened to Feid.

In September 2022, the Colombian singer-songwriter was headlining three consecutive sold-out hometown dates at Plaza de Toros La Macarena — Medellín's famed bullfighting ring and concert venue — where he performed for more than 30,000 people over the course of the three shows. He was due for some much-needed rest the following Monday. But that never happened.

Instead, the artist born Salomón Villada Hoyos, 30, who also goes by the nickname Ferxxo, received an agitated call from his manager, Luis Villamizar, with the news that his album, *Feliz Cumpleaños Ferxxo* — scheduled for a December release — had, without their knowledge, arrived much earlier, in the form of a 39-minute voice note first leaked as a link on the internet.

"All my spirits dropped," he recalls today, still sounding disappointed. "It was incomplete. It was a mess, and I felt rage — but that feeling lasted about half an hour. After that, I talked to my mom to see how we could take advantage of the situation and thankfully, we reacted quickly."

With help from his team, producers and record label, Universal Music Latino (UML), he took matters into his own hands, working relentlessly for 24 hours to release an album that wasn't even mixed or mastered yet. Because all 15 tracks had been leaked, Feid changed the title to *Feliz Cumpleaños Ferxxo Te Pirateamos El Álbum* (*Happy Birthday Feid We Leaked the Album*) and had his sister, who's also his longtime graphic designer, create new cover art that acknowledged how the songs had ultimately spread: Though Universal quickly took down the initial leaked link, the audio had already been shared to DropBox and then sent wide through a chain of WhatsApp conversations. (Six of the 15 tracks had already been released as singles at the time of the leak.)

> **"I BEGAN TO BE MORE FAITHFUL TO WHO I AM AND MY COLOMBIAN ROOTS. AT THAT MOMENT, I OPENED THE COOLEST DOOR... WHICH WAS FINDING MY IDENTITY AND INTRODUCING EL FERXXO."**
>
> **—Feid**

On Sept. 14, just two days after it leaked, the album — powered by syncopated *perreos*, reggaetón swagger and chill house beats — officially came out. Feid remains unsure of who leaked the set and why. But that's now beside the point: *Feliz Cumpleaños Ferxxo* earned him his first top 10 entry on *Billboard*'s Top Latin Albums chart, surging from No. 25 to No. 8 in its second week, on the chart dated Oct. 1, 2022. It concurrently became his first entry on the Billboard 200 and peaked at No. 5 on Latin Rhythm Albums. "Normal," the set's fourth single, also became Feid's first Hot Latin Songs entry as a soloist, following five alongside stars like J Balvin, Nicky Jam and Karol G. The track peaked at No. 1 on the Latin Rhythm Airplay chart on Jan. 21.

To maintain momentum, Feid and his team made another swift change of plans, deciding to rebook a previously in-the-works club tour — his first headlining U.S. run — to theaters to reflect his rapidly growing popularity, and to execute the task, from booking to opening night, in less than a month. Hans Schafer, senior vp of global touring at Live Nation, the tour's promoter, told *Billboard* at the time that, like the album's assembly, "everyone worked really quickly to turn this around." Tickets to the 14-date stint, which began Oct. 13 in Atlanta and wrapped Nov. 25 in Los Angeles, sold out in 24 hours.

Feid has always had a clear creative vision concerning his music, which laces innovative urban beats with the essence of early-2000s reggaetón and lyrics about love. But his biggest barrier to achieving solo mainstream success for himself was trusting that intuition, rather than worrying about others' opinions. It took years, but Feid finally realized the importance of being faithful to his core identity. And while the album leak was jarring and unplanned, the foundation he laid over more than a decade of making music allowed him to seize the opportunity and explode in popularity. With the tour, his ability to pivot quickly kept yielding successes.

"It was very special to go to the shows and see people dressed as me with green clothes, white glasses and even a gold tooth," Feid gushes. "After the first show, I told my team, 'Look carefully at this stage because, God willing, we will never have people as close as we do now. We will have them further and further away.'" In other words, Feid expects to be playing U.S. arenas and stadiums before long.

FOR A TEENAGE FEID, even playing the theaters of his fall tour would have been unimaginable.

As a seventh grader at Colegio San José de La Salle in Medellín, he discovered his passion for performing during a school talent show. Singing Daddy Yankee's "Rompe (Remix)" with a group of friends as The Three Fathers, "I liked seeing how people were enjoying something I was doing," he recalls. "I was shaking with nerves, but when I started to sing it all went away."

That performance and others like it, known as *colegios* (school tours), are common for aspiring teen artists in Colombia, and they eventually allowed Feid to connect with Alejandro Ramírez Suárez, who would become Latin Grammy-winning producer Sky Rompiendo — and Feid's longtime collaborator alongside Mosty, Wain, and Jowan and Rolo of production duo Icon Music.

By their early 20s, both Feid (whose moniker sounds like "faith" when spoken in Spanish) and Sky were making names for themselves in their hometown. Feid had already independently released singles such as "Bailame" and "Morena," both of which gained traction in Latin America; Sky was the mastermind behind J Balvin's first No. 1 chart hit, "Ay Vamos," which peaked in March 2015.

Around then, Feid "unintentionally" fell into songwriting after Colombian artist Shako asked if he could record a song Feid had written for himself, called "Robarte Hoy." "I was still new in the industry and didn't even know writing for other artists was a thing," he recalls (a year later, Shako invited him on the remix). One of the first popular tracks Feid wrote was Reykon's "Secretos," which ultimately led him to work with Balvin as a writer on the 2016 hit "Ginza," nabbing Feid an ASCAP Latin award along the way.

"I started taking him to the studio when we had camps for Balvin because he has always had great chemistry," Sky remembers. "Yes, he helped us write 'Ginza,' but the song where he proved himself as a songwriter was 'Sigo Extrañándote,' " another track for Balvin that showcased Feid's heartfelt, relatable lyricism. As Balvin tells *Billboard*, "He always brought something fresh to the table,

and I always let him know of his potential."

Suddenly, Feid's "reggaetón music with pop lyrics" had made him the hip, on-demand songwriter that artists from Thalía to Ximena Sariñana to CNCO wanted to work with. In 2016, he signed an exclusive worldwide publishing administration deal with Universal Music Publishing Group (UMPG) through management and publishing company Dynasty Music Group, helmed by his then-manager, Daniel Giraldo, and Juan Pablo Piedrahita. Soon after, he signed his first record deal with In-Tu Linea, a label then under the Universal Music Latin Entertainment (UMLE) umbrella that was launched by industry veteran Jorge Pino and his longtime colleague Fidel Hernández as COO. Although "many labels showed their interest," Feid says, Pino and Hernández were the only ones to make the "very special" gesture of meeting him in person.

Feid made his major-label debut with the Balvin-featuring "Que Raro," which became his first *Billboard* chart entry, debuting and peaking at No. 26 on Latin Digital Song Sales and peaking at No. 16 on Latin Rhythm Airplay in 2016.

"Today, I highly value that moment that Balvin gave me — the spotlight in which he put me, the type of song it was," he says. "It was super cool for my career, for my life, for everything I have been building. There are still people who tell me that they followed me or discovered me with 'Que Raro.' "

Soon after, Feid collaborated with artists such as Maluma and Nacho; released his debut album, *Así Como Suena*, in 2017; received a Latin Grammy nomination for his next one (2019's *19*); and joined "The Avengers," a collective of urbano artists that included Dalex, Dímelo Flow, Justin Quiles, Lenny Tavárez and Sech and released club bangers such as "Cuaderno" and "Quizas." Around then, he also stopped writing music for others.

"I needed to find myself as an artist," he says. Though Feid was gaining popularity writing for big acts, he hadn't yet discovered his own strong artistic identity, and admits he was following the standards he observed in the industry by being "an average singer releasing average music." As other Colombian artists of his generation such as Maluma, Karol G and Balvin skyrocketed to stardom, he wondered, "When will it be my turn?"

Then one day, after more than a decade of work, it clicked.

> **"HE HAS A LOT OF PERSEVERANCE AND A LOT OF PERSISTENCE THAT FEW HAVE. MANY [ARTISTS] WOULD HAVE GOTTEN OUT OF THE WAY BY NOW, BUT HE WAS ALWAYS THERE. NOW HE IS LIVING HIS BEST MOMENT."** —J Balvin

"I decided to take an arepa with cheese in my hand and say that I was *paisa*," he proudly states, referring to the local word for someone from Medellín. "I began to be more faithful to who I am and my Colombian roots. At that moment, I opened the coolest door that I've ever opened, which was finding my identity and introducing El Ferxxo. It took me a long time to realize that this was what I had to do to really, really connect with people."

Putting his new alter ego to the test, Ferxxo (pronounced Fercho) began incorporating local Medallo slang into his lyrics, like *mor* (love), *que chimba* (how cool) and *parchar* (hanging out) and replacing letters in his titles with X's to pique curiosity.

It worked. The Latin Grammys nominated 2020's *Ferxxo (Vol. 1: M.O.R.)* and its Justin Quiles-featuring single "Porfa" for best urban music album and best reggaetón performance, respectively. On the strength of an all-star remix featuring Balvin, Maluma, Nicky Jam and Sech, "Porfa" earned Feid his first No. 1 hit on both the Latin Airplay and Latin Rhythm Airplay charts.

As he established his musical identity, Feid recognized that creating a visual one was similarly important. He adopted the color green (most often, a lime shade) as his trademark, starting in early 2022 with the release of the single "Castigo": Its cover art features a green monster truck and in the music video, Feid is clad in all green.

"It reminded me of the time when I was a huge fan of artists and wanted all the merch that had to do with them. I try to put myself in the shoes of a fan so that the people who follow me have a better chance of feeling closer to me," he says. Now, he always finds a way to wear it — the color of growth and new beginnings.

A**S 2021 PROGRESSED,** it seemed like everything was falling into place for Feid. He inked a worldwide publishing agreement with UMPG, fully transitioned from In-Tu Linea to UML under president Angel Kaminsky's team and opened Karol G's *Bichota* U.S. arena tour.

Still, it wasn't all smooth sailing — and in fact, his month on the road with Karol was a tough wake-up call. "I feel that 90% of people saw my show for the first time," he says. "Coming from being a big deal in Colombia and being at the top of the charts to doing a show in Sacramento [Calif.] and having only five people yell 'Wooo!' was challenging for me."

Then, shortly after returning home, a motorcycle accident left Feid with a severely injured left knee that required a two-month recovery. But instead of wallowing in his pain (or just kicking back to watch Netflix), Feid got to work on his next album.

"There were moments of doubt and complications," says Jesús López, chairman/CEO of Universal Music Latin America & Iberian Peninsula. "It was bad luck for his leg but good luck for his head because he was able to be calmer for a while and work more on the creativity of his album *Feliz Cumpleaños Ferxxo*."

Hunkered down with his leg in a cast, Feid organically started engaging more with fans on TikTok. He would flirtatiously react to viral videos in his suave Medallo, create simple dance challenges for his music, tell jokes and, most importantly, preview tracks he was working on, like "Normal." On TikTok, he realized, it was easier to promote himself (and go viral) than through an interview with a major news platform, and it became one of his biggest marketing tools, attracting new fans outside Colombia in places such as the United States, Mexico and Spain. (Feid now has more than 7.5 million TikTok followers.)

But it wasn't until two trips to Mexico in 2022 that Feid truly noticed the effects of his social media presence. When he arrived in May for a festival in Monterrey, thousands of fans greeted him at the InterContinental Presidente hotel in Mexico City, prompting Feid and his team to schedule shows of his own in the country. In August, the three resulting headlining gigs — at Auditorio Nacional (Mexico City), Auditorio Citibanamex (Monterrey) and Auditorio Telmex (Guadalajara) — sold almost 20,000 tickets and grossed nearly $1 million, according to Billboard Boxscore. Previously, Feid had only performed in Mexico as a surprise guest for other artists.

"I feel that everything has been gradual in my career, but this was definitely an alert to us that something was happening," he says with a laugh. "I still don't want to realize what's happening. I just want to keep making my music, be with my family, eat *frijolitos* (beans) and relax, but I can say that Mexico was that moment when we all wondered, 'What's going on?' "

Today, speaking with me in Miami's hip Wynwood neighborhood, fame doesn't seem to have changed Feid — and he's embracing his paisa identity more than ever. He's wearing his laid-back, go-to uniform of shorts, sneakers, baseball cap and graphic T-shirt and proudly rocking the first-ever backpack from his collaboration with Bogotá-based brand Totto. He's polite and warm, arriving early for his *Billboard* photo shoot ("People's time is valuable") and greeting everyone in the room with a chiseled smile and a tight hug. "*Que más mi reina? Todo bien*?" he asks me — "All good, my queen?"

While it may have taken some extra time to get here, Feid's down-to-earth appeal is central to why, finally, he's prospering. Feid attributes his success to "the perfect timing of God," but those around him know there's a bit more to it.

"He is real and authentic," says his manager, Villamizar. "In his music, what he writes, what he says. The DNA of all this success is him and people notice and feel it."

"He has a lot of perseverance and a lot of persistence that few have," says Balvin. "Many [artists] would have gotten out of the way by now, but he was always there. Now he is living his best moment, and I'm sure many more blessings will come his way."

Late last year, Feid released his second collaboration of 2022 with Yandel, and he's carried that momentum into 2023, earning his first Hot 100 entry with the Ozuna-assisted "Hey Mor" and embarking on his first proper Latin American trek, the sold-out Ferxxo: Nitro Jam Tour promoted by CMN. He'll headline Chicago's Sueños Music Festival in May and tour Europe this summer, all while working on his next album. Its "whole concept has to do with how I went from being in the shadows as a composer to everything I am achieving now [as an artist]," he explains.

Feid is covered in tattoos, but one on the right side of his neck is particularly noticeable. In cursive, it reads: *Nunca olvides porque empezaste* (never forget why you started) — a reminder to stay grounded. "Fe," or faith, is at the core of what got him here, and what will keep him going forward.

"From the beginning, it was [my dream] to have a vision that only I could have and could spread to people and also surround myself with a team that understood what I wanted to do," he says. "I have always had a lot of faith in myself and my career — and that is why Ferxxo is called 'Feid.' " **b**

Feid will perform at Billboard*'s The Stage at South by Southwest, presented by Samsung Galaxy, on March 17. Penske Media Corp. is the largest shareholder of SXSW; its brands are official media partners of SXSW.*

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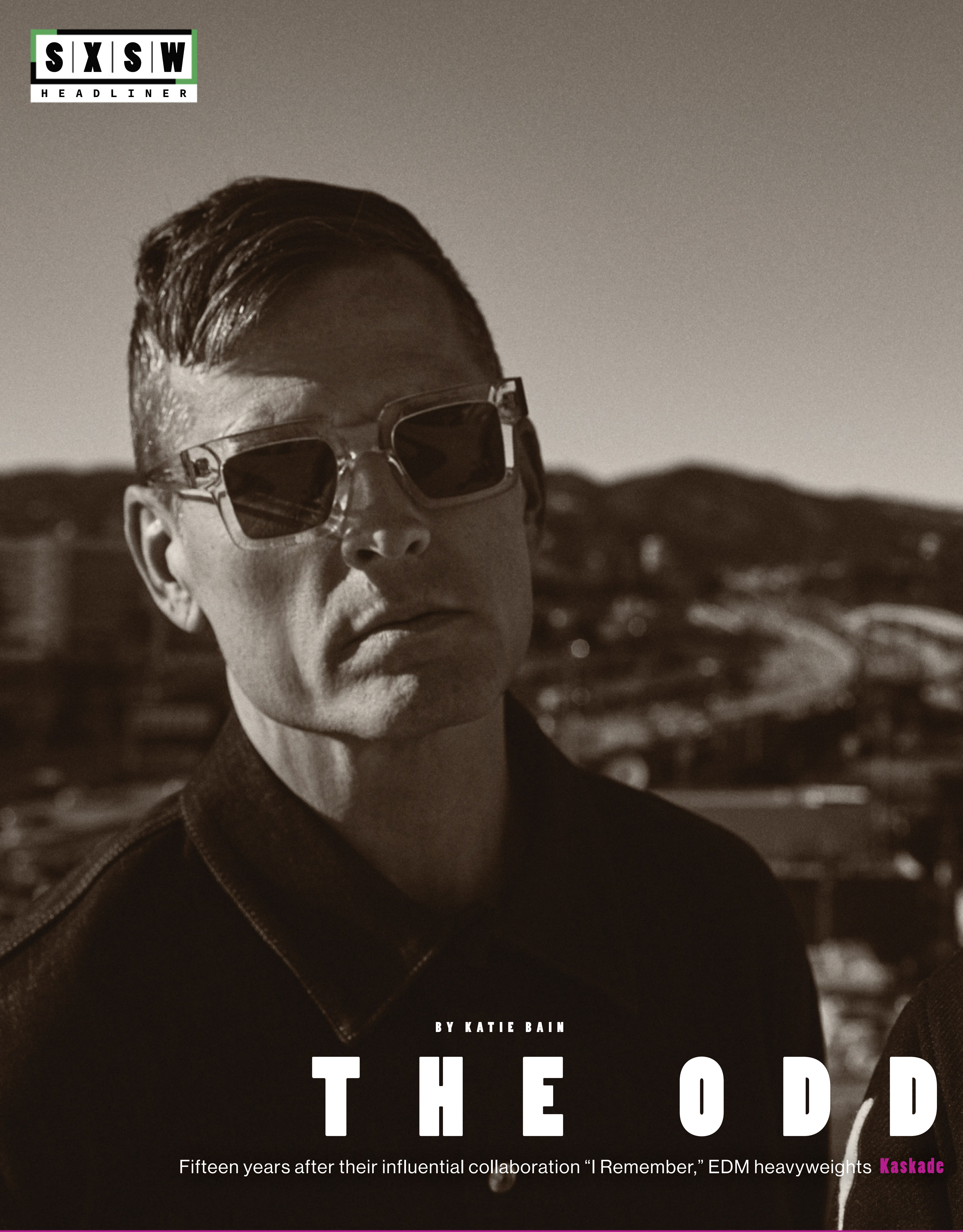
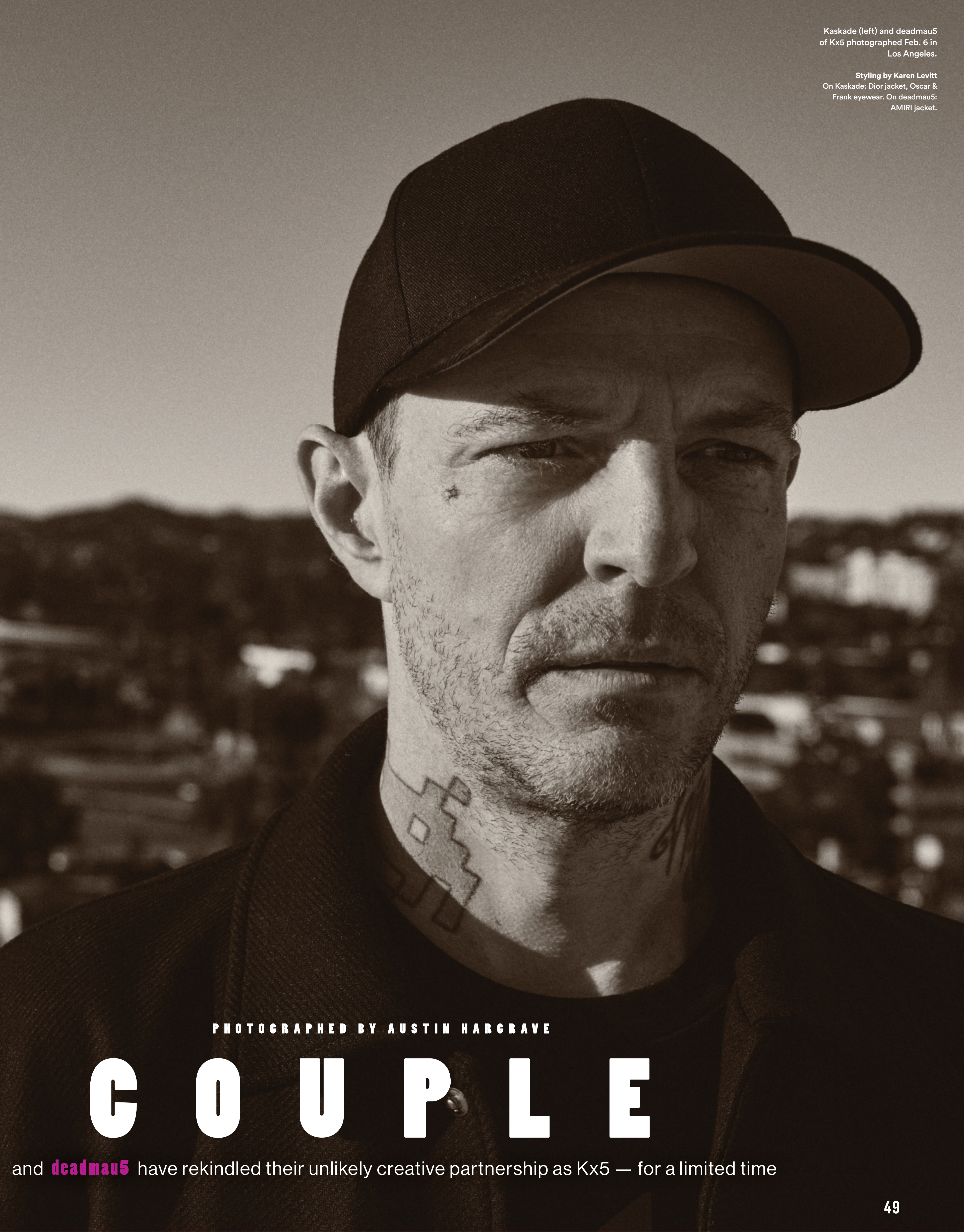


BY KATIE BAIN

THE ODD

Fifteen years after their influential collaboration “I Remember,” EDM heavyweights **Kaskade**



Kaskade (left) and deadmau5 of Kx5 photographed Feb. 6 in Los Angeles.

Styling by Karen Levitt
On Kaskade: Dior jacket, Oscar & Frank eyewear. On deadmau5: AMIRI jacket.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY AUSTIN HARGRAVE

COUPLE

and **deadmau5** have rekindled their unlikely creative partnership as Kx5 — for a limited time

THE SHOW WAS GOING SO WELL. An hour into the set from Kx5 — the electronic music supergroup of genre leaders Kaskade and deadmau5 — it was, as intended, a dazzling feat of light, sound, video and the emotional punch of those elements combined. Then the power went out, and Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum — and the 46,000 fans assembled there on that drizzly night in December — were thrust into silent darkness.

From the front of the house, deadmau5's longtime manager, Dean Wilson, sprinted backstage — where, he says, he found "everybody running around like headless chickens, screaming, 'Generator's on fire!' "

The generator was not supposed to be on fire. However, it had turned itself off due to overheating and was emanating smoke. Its programming had then instructed three backup generators to also shut down to avoid igniting the 17,000 gallons of diesel fuel inside. Frantic staffers worked to salvage what had been billed as a landmark live performance — one that cost "almost seven figures to design and over seven figures to execute," says Kaskade's manager, Ryan Henderson.

Success seemed unlikely. "When you have a major failure like that, normally something then doesn't work," Wilson says. "Something's not rebooted properly. Some configuration can't restart because it has crashed so badly." But when deadmau5 hit the button that would, in theory, restart the show, restart it did. The performance, co-produced by Live Nation affiliate and powerhouse electronic music promoter Insomniac Events alongside both artists' teams, set a record for the biggest ticketed global headliner dance event of 2022.

"I've been working in the electronic/dance space since the early '90s," says UTA's Kevin Gimble, who represents deadmau5, Kaskade and Kx5. "I have been fortunate to have a lot of incredible moments throughout my career. However, nothing — and I mean nothing — can compare to the emotions that were stirred within me seeing [nearly] 50,000 people inside that building singing 'I Remember' in unison. Pure fucking magic."

As Kx5, deadmau5 and Kaskade have formalized a collaborative relationship that began with the aforementioned moody 2008 classic — one of EDM's first defining tracks, the penultimate song played during the L.A. Coliseum performance and, in dance parlance, an all-time banger. In 2009, they released a follow-up single, "Move for Me." Now, 14 years later, they are leveling up the partnership with the March 17 arrival of Kx5's eponymous debut album, which is being released on deadmau5's independent label, mau5trap Recordings.

The show wasn't just a full-circle moment for Kx5: It was one for dance music itself. In June 2010, deadmau5 and Kaskade, playing separately, were among the last electronic artists to perform at the L.A. Coliseum during what would be the final Los Angeles iteration of Electric Daisy Carnival. Produced by Insomniac and featuring then-rising acts like Avicii and Swedish House Mafia, the festival created a maelstrom of headlines (and lawsuits) when a 15-year-old girl who had snuck into the event died after overdosing on MDMA. In the aftermath, Los Angeles sent EDC packing to Las Vegas, and the venue became a no-fly zone for electronic music — and, aside from a handful of shows throughout the 2010s, most other genres, too — even as EDM was becoming a major commercial force in the United States.

"We'd heard rumors they were going to start doing more shows at the Coliseum, and I was like, 'Wouldn't it be amazing if we were the first electronic act to do a show back in that venue?' " Wilson recalls. "We were absolutely the test case."

"Kaskade kind of straddles the line between electronic and pop music," says Henderson of why promoters book the producer in venues where dance music might be otherwise verboten. "People don't associate him with rave culture as much as you'd think."

With the December show filed as a win, deadmau5 and Kaskade symbolically marked a decade-plus run during which they became two of the genre's most successful artists. Alongside peers like Swedish House Mafia, Avicii, Calvin Harris and Skrillex, they helped create the superstar DJ template of Vegas residencies, arena shows, festival headlining and massive paychecks. To date, Kaskade's catalog has aggregated 736 million U.S. streams, according to Luminate, and deadmau5's has clocked 1.5 billion.

They remain two of the scene's most elite acts, having influenced a generation of fans and artists alike. John Summit, the 28-year-old dance phenom who opened the Coliseum show, told Wilson that deadmau5's "Ghosts 'n' Stuff" was the reason he started making music. (Later in 2023, Summit will release the first official remix of "I Remember.")

But while Kx5's out-of-the-gate success was made possible by each artist's individual popularity and the near mythological status of their previous collaborative output, the project is more about their own enjoyment than the new creative directions some of their peers have followed as their careers have progressed.

"It was literally a product of us saying, 'Fuck it,' " says deadmau5, born Joel Zimmerman, in his pronounced Canadian accent. "I'm not saying we don't love it, but we don't need it, financially speaking. It's just something we want."

On Kaskade (left): Dior jacket and sneakers, MOUTY pants, Oscar & Frank eyewear. On deadmau5: AMIRI jacket, pants and sneakers.

ON THIS MONDAY afternoon in Los Angeles, deadmau5, who's based in Toronto, sits alongside Chicago native Kaskade (real name: Ryan Raddon), who is now based in L.A. Deadmau5 makes infrequent eye contact and uses a variation of "fuck" upwards of 40 times during the 45-minute conversation. "Dude" is the interjection of choice for Kaskade, who wears reflective-lensed sunglasses.

As they tell it, Kx5 (pronounced "kay five"; the "x" is silent) is essentially the result of friendship meeting market demand and pandemic downtime. Crowds would still "freak out" when Kaskade dropped "I Remember" in his sets and, he says, "every time I'd see Joel at a festival, I'd be like, 'Man, we should probably do something together.' He'd be like, 'Yeah, we probably should.' "

When live events paused, Kaskade called him to make it official, saying, "OK, seriously, I don't have anything to do. Let's do something." They started emailing productions back and forth, with tracks taking shape as the pandemic wore on.

Kx5 soft-launched in July 2021 during Kaskade's headlining set at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, Calif. Produced by Insomniac and marking the first public concert at the new venue, the show sold 27,000 tickets and grossed $2.6 million, according to Billboard Boxscore. It also featured a surprise opening set from deadmau5, who returned later to play "I Remember" alongside Kaskade. (They didn't play any Kx5 music, nor did deadmau5 don the plastic mouse helmet he has long worn during solo performances.)

Shortly after the SoFi show, UTA's Gimble began conversations with Insomniac and Live Nation about a Kx5 play at the Coliseum. Nearly six months later, on Jan. 3, 2022, deadmau5, Kaskade and their managers met in L.A. to strategize Kx5. Discussions around the artists doing something official together had started ahead of the pandemic, when they were offered a back-to-back set at HARD Summer 2020. When that show was canceled amid lockdowns, HARD promoter

Insomniac shifted the offer to EDC 2022, where Kaskade and deadmau5 decided to debut the Kx5 live show. But they still needed a lead single.

Wilson, who has managed deadmau5 since the artist launched that persona in 2006, had been sitting on a top-line demo of a song called "Escape" from U.K. songwriters Camden Cox, Will Clarke and Eddie Jenkins. Deadmau5 had been tinkering with the demo's production but was concerned, Wilson says, that it didn't sound "new enough" compared with his more recent output.

Nonetheless, at the January 2022 meeting in L.A., Wilson told Kaskade they had a track that might work as Kx5's first release. "Joel looks at me like, 'What?' " Wilson says. "And I play 'Escape,' and Ryan goes, 'We've got to do that.' "

Deadmau5 sent parts of the song to Kaskade, who soon completed it. ("Let's make it radio-ey," says deadmau5 of their goal for it. "Let's make it 'I Remember'-ey. Strip it back, keep some of that early-2000s vibe to it.") Released in March 2022 — three months before the debut Kx5 performance at EDC — critics and fans hailed "Escape" as a triumphant return to form, a fresh take on the dreamy, sexy yet melancholy slow-burn style the duo had forged with "I Remember."

"Escape" has garnered 47.7 million official U.S. on-demand streams. And by the time the song (featuring British singer Hayla) hit No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Dance Mix Show/Airplay chart in April 2022, Kaskade and deadmau5's idea for a Kx5 EP had expanded into plans for an album. "Don't threaten us with a good time," the latter jokes about the project's growth. Kaskade laughs.

In July 2022, Kaskade joined deadmau5 at his home studio in Toronto. "It ended up being a lot of hanging out, wake-surfing, chilling and talking about music," recalls Kaskade. "We had a songwriting session that went until, like, four in the morning. I couldn't stay up anymore."

While they keep different hours, they agree that working together is a more streamlined process than when they record individually. "The benefit of doing it together is you get to bounce ideas off somebody else," Kaskade says. "Usually when you're in your own space, it's like, 'I think this is the end?' With somebody else in the mix, I send it over to Joel. Like, 'I think it's done. What do you think?' " Working together, they agree, also eliminates expectations among their fans. "They don't know what to think," says Kaskade. "They're like, 'Let's see what this is about.' " The resulting 10-track album is simultaneously sophisticated and tough, featuring complex and inventive progressive house productions that pulse and glow. Lyrics — largely about love and the loss of it — ride achingly pretty, often haunting melodies.

"Ryan excels as a songwriter and in arrangement and structure, where I suppose I excel in mastering, engineering and the more technical components of sound versus the idea," deadmau5 says. "He's got his wheelhouse, I've got mine, and we don't overlap a lot. Like, I would sooner shoot myself in the leg before I'm like, 'Here, Ryan, master this.' "

Their differences run deeper than their production strengths. While deadmau5 has been known to stay awake for three days straight making music, Kaskade appears to sleep regularly. Deadmau5 smokes cigarettes; Kaskade does not. Deadmau5 drinks Corona. Kaskade, a practicing Mormon, is sober. He remarks that it's surreal to be doing an interview for the cover of *Billboard*. Deadmau5 announces he would rather be at home playing video games.

"I call them the odd couple," says Wilson. "They're yin and yang, chalk and cheese, completely different ends of the spectrum, but they ultimately have a respect for each other as producers." And respect from deadmau5 is rare: In EDM's heyday, he used Twitter to insult everyone from Justin Bieber ("little fucking dickhead") to Disney, which in 2014 sued him over the similarities between his "mau5head" and its Mickey Mouse logo. ("Disney thinks you might confuse an established electronic musician/performer with a cartoon mouse. That's how stupid they think you are.") In 2015, he published a Tumblr post about dealing with depression exacerbated by social media; his team now runs his accounts.

Deadmau5's prickly (if, by now, predictable) nature makes his creative, and personal, alchemy with Kaskade all the more remarkable. "Joel doesn't … he has very, very few relationships like that," Wilson continues. "Joel's a self-contained machine. His studio is in the middle of the house. He works predominantly on his own. He doesn't do massive collaborations on a regular basis. But I think he likes Kx5 because it's so different than it being all about the mouse head. There's pressure in that, but with the two of them, you can see Joel go, 'This is a bit of fun.' It's much more of the relaxed, funny Joel because he's got a sparring partner, a foil, someone he can joke with. You can't do that if you're doing it on your own."

T**HE FACT REMAINS THAT KX5** has an expiration date. The pair is scheduled to play just five more shows beyond South by Southwest, all U.S. festival sets, starting at Miami's Ultra Music Festival in late March and ending in September at a currently unannounced East Coast event. (Although "nobody's closing the door on what this could be in the future," Henderson says. "There's something special here.")

"We can show up and crush a big event, but I'm not going to fucking hammer it until we're both over it," says deadmau5. "I don't want to be fucking Siegfried & Roy over here doing 20 shows a night in fucking Vegas. We'll just do some nice, big, iconic-looking plays, then fucking Ryan's off Kaskade-ing and deadmau5 is out deadmau5-ing."

Indeed, as EDM elder statesmen (relatively: Kaskade is 51, and deadmau5 is 42), they can do a one-off super pairing without relying on it for relevancy or income. (That said, the impact of Kx5 "feeds residual revenue streams" like streaming numbers and solo plays for each individual artist, Henderson says, adding that Kaskade just signed a three-year, eight-figure Vegas residency deal. "I'm not saying the Kx5 brand contributed to that," Henderson adds, "but it definitely didn't hurt it.")

But having come up, says deadmau5, "right at the turning point" when EDM was the world's most lucrative genre, his and Kaskade's brands are now foundational to the music's culture, and their businesses extend well beyond streaming. "The money is in ancillary goods," deadmau5 says. "Tangible items [like merchandise], appearances, shows, production." He adds, "I don't think I'm going to be fucking donning a mau5head in my 50s," noting he may shift into managing mau5trap acts as he gets older and tours less.

But since they broke through in the EDM golden age, paths to success in the wider industry have become more difficult, making it harder for both emerging and established artists to score crossover hits. By the time *Kx5* drops, eight of its singles will already be out because, says Wilson, digital service providers would only support two tracks if they were all released at once — and thus no one would hear most of the music. While deadmau5 has over 10 million fans across Instagram and Facebook, Wilson says the algorithms won't allow communication with most of them. He also says that despite the success of "Escape" on dance radio and the $300,000 put behind its campaign — "We spent hundreds of thousands working that record. Who else has got that kind of money?" he asks — they couldn't get the song on Spotify's Today's Top Hits playlist. "You break down those playlists, and they're all predominantly major-owned acts," says Wilson, who co-founded mau5trap with deadmau5 in 2007. "It's a closed shop."

Still, the strength of deadmau5 and Kaskade's respective brands reduces the need for Kx5 to generate revenue. "They're definitely investing more than they're making," Henderson says. "This whole project is for the fans. This isn't getting these guys together, throwing them on a stage, exploiting their legacy and bringing in a bunch of money. It's about making something special for their fans. They 100% sacrifice income to play together."

Kaskade concedes that since corporate interests entered the mix during the EDM boom, the scene has become "more predictable" — or, as deadmau5 puts it, now "it's all a bunch of little douche nozzles that know the trends, and how this is going to work, and you have to do it like this, and it homogenizes it all to shit." The optimist of the duo, Kaskade believes there will always be an underground and the unpredictable music it fosters, but "just not like it was 20 years ago or 10 years ago, when the majors got involved."

But while Wilson says EDM is often treated as the "poor relative" among other more visible genres in the wider industry, it remains "a great multibillion-dollar business with very successful festivals and a fan base that is very deep and that buys our tickets."

"Is it commercially viable in terms of pop album sales? Fuck no," says deadmau5. "Is it commercially viable? Hell yeah. If it wasn't, we wouldn't be doing this. I'd be your stock boy at Bed Bath & Beyond."

In the end, the L.A. Coliseum show earned $3.7 million. Kx5 didn't have to cover the cost of a new generator. ◼

Kx5 will perform at Billboard's *The Stage at South by Southwest, presented by Carnival, on March 18. Penske Media Corp. is the largest shareholder of SXSW; its brands are official media partners of SXSW.*

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Bad Bunny onstage in San Juan (top) in 2022.

A TINY ISLAND'S BIG INFLUENCE ON MUSIC

Industry executives break down how Puerto Rico became a powerhouse in Latin music

WHEN BAD BUNNY picked up his best música urbana album award at the Grammys in February, he dedicated his win to "Puerto Rico, the cradle and the capital of reggaetón worldwide." The superstar wasn't grandstanding. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico *is* tiny. According to the most recent U.S. Census, there are a mere 3.2 million people on an island that measures 111 miles by 39 miles, roughly one-third the size of neighboring Haiti and one-fifth the size of the Dominican Republic. When it comes to music, however, Puerto Rico is a global giant — and not solely because of Bad Bunny's record-breaking achievements over the past three years.

"Puerto Rico has been one of the main exporters of music for decades now," says Paco López, founder and president of concert promoter No Limit Entertainment. "We're very small in terms of territory, but very big in talent."

Puerto Rico's outsize influence can be found throughout Latin music history in the works of Héctor Lavoe, Willie Colón, Ricky Martín, Elvis Crespo, Marc Anthony and Jennifer López, as well as the current wave of urban music. Although reggaetón originated in Panama, it became globally popular thanks to Puerto Rican acts such as Tego Calderón, Daddy Yankee, Wisin y Yandel and Don Omar, and has reached new heights thanks to newcomers like Bad Bunny and Rauw Alejandro.

That impact on the music industry is not limited to artists. Puerto Rico is home base for a growing number of recording studios, independent labels and concert venues that are supported by the growing number of music schools, educational initiatives and government incentives that keep the industry on the island evolving.

Between November 2021 and October 2022, the Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot alone grossed more than $40 million, according to Billboard Boxscore. And according to ASM Global regional GM Jorge Pérez, who oversees the fabled venue, the island's live-entertainment industry created 30,000 jobs and generated $2 billion annually over the past two years. In that time, Puerto Rico also began hosting major televised shows, including *Premios Tu Música Urbano* (Telemundo), *Premios Juventud* (Univision) and *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve*, that were broadcast from the territory. (*Billboard* parent company Penske Media Corp. partially acquired dick clark productions in January.)

Billboard spoke with 14 Puerto Rican industry leaders about the present and the future of the world's most musical island. —LEILA COBO

SAN JUAN: GETTY IMAGES. BUNNY: GLADYS VEGA/GETTY IMAGES.

Exporting Tradition

Rimas Entertainment head label manager Raymond Acosta says the Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot is a local treasure that hosts at least one show a week. The venue (known locally as “El Choli”) has become the island’s most iconic venue, with elite acts including Rimas artists Bad Bunny and Arcángel performing sold-out runs there. The venue is “a synonym for prestige for local acts who work day to day to give the Puerto Rican audience a groundbreaking show,” says the executive, who works under Bad Bunny manager Noah Assad. Acosta also points to the island’s ever-evolving use of technology as a factor in its growing global impact, stating, “We have been improving our skills around the music-creating process and learned how to translate our culture and traditions into music.”

‘Hotbed Of Artistic Creativity’

LaMusica vp of content development Bianca Alarcon, who says the island’s global influence is undeniable, describes Puerto Rico as a “hotbed of artistic creativity. … If there’s one thing Puerto Rico knows how to do best, it’s to create and evolve a genre of music and make it universally successful. It happened back in the ’50s and ’60s with the Cuban mambo, the boogaloo, the cha-cha-cha and Latin jazz, which Puerto Rican artists then morphed into what became known as salsa. Ditto with reggaetón. The Panamanians invented the sound, and the Puerto Ricans tweaked it and ignited it at a global level.” **WHAT’S NEXT FOR PUERTO RICO?** “Female artists are also getting some serious traction, which makes me super enthusiastic,” says Alarcon. “Artists like Young Miko, Villano Antillano, Catalina, Cory, paopao and RaiNao are killing it and creating some nifty collaborations in the process. *¡Gracias al canto de la isla del encanto!*”

It’s Not Just The Artists

According to Duars Entertainment founder/CEO Eric Duars, the star power emanating from Puerto Rico would not have happened without the executives who guide artists to success, such as managers Raphy Pina and Noah Assad, who launched the careers of chart-topping acts Daddy Yankee and Bad Bunny, respectively. “The global industry must know that the talent in Puerto Rico is not limited to the artists,” says Duars, who knows the territory well. He manages Puerto Rican star Rauw Alejandro, whose *Saturno* peaked at No. 2 on *Billboard*’s Top Latin Albums chart in November. Duars adds, “We have a range of behind-the-scenes talents that have been just as relevant when it comes to developing new artists and launching them worldwide.”

Ties To The Mainland

The fact that Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory means it’s a “friendly” destination that shares the same currency and passport requirements as the 50 states, says José “Pepe” Dueño, president of concert promoter José Dueño Entertainment Group. Located just over two hours from Miami by plane, “Puerto Rico has been the vacation/concert destination for many international acts, such as The Rolling Stones, Madonna, Lady Gaga, Elton John, Billy Joel, Sting, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Maroon 5 and AC/DC,” Dueño says. He adds that “with the social media revolution, fans all over Puerto Rico are connected with a wider variety of global talent. Puerto Rico is a friendly destination for young artists as well as for those megastars.”

Artists For The History Books

Puerto Rico’s vibrant music scene is growing faster than ever thanks to digital advances and streaming platforms, according to Nanette Lamboy, CEO of marketing agency Artist Solutions. “We have top Puerto Rican superstars proudly representing the island all over the world,” she says, as well as writing their names in the pages of popular music and political history. In 2019, several musicians, including Ricky Martín, Bad Bunny and Residente, spearheaded anti-government protests after politically damning chats between Gov. Ricardo Rosselló and his staff leaked, resulting in Rosselló’s resignation.

Decades Of Puerto Rican Excellence

“When you talk about music, you need to talk about Puerto Rico,” says No Limit Entertainment’s López. He explains that the path for the latest generation of stars was paved by Menudo in the 1980s and by salsa stars and merengue artists like Elvis Crespo and Olga Tañón in the 1990s. “By the end of the 1990s, Ricky Martín and his ‘Livin’ la Vida Loca’ and ‘The Cup of Life’ made it to the World Cup and also got the audience on its feet at the 1999 Grammy Awards,” López says. As a result, the popularity of Puerto Rican artists and music has spread throughout Latin America and Europe, with a big boost from Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee’s “Despacito” in 2017. And “today, we boast the No. 1 artist in the world, Bad Bunny, who leads both streaming and touring artists.” **WHAT’S NEXT FOR PUERTO RICO?** “I heard from an indie impresario who wants to create traveling music studios in trucks and take them to housing projects and poorer neighborhoods to give young people with few resources the opportunity to display their talent,” says López. “If he’s able to pull this off, young people with scarce resources would be able to experience being in a music studio and recording their own music.”

Clockwise: Daddy Yankee, Young Miko and Villano Antillano.

YANKEE: ALEXANDER TAMARGO/GETTY IMAGES. ANTILLANO: MICHAEL BUCKNER FOR PENSKE MEDIA. MIKO: JOHN PARRA/GETTY IMAGES.

Investing In New Talent

“We have demonstrated [the] fact that we are a very important place to develop talent,” says Andres Martinez, who manages Yandel and co-founded Jak Entertainment, of his native Puerto Rico. He praises the region’s Act 20 Decree of 2012 as a factor for helping boost the industry as a whole. The decree offers tax incentives for Puerto Rican companies to export their services, resulting in an estimated $210 million as of 2019 in added fiscal revenue, according to the Puerto Rican government. Many in the industry — including performers, producers, promoters and other executives — "have developed a financial organization chart around the law" to help fund projects and invest in talent, says Martinez.

▸ Still The Reggaetón Kingmaker

According to Molusco, a TV, radio and YouTube host, Puerto Ricans aren't concerned that the reggaetón popularized by Don Omar and Daddy Yankee is being effectively re-created in other countries. After all, the genre's artists still have to "get their due" on the island and play iconic venues like Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot. "The genre evolved in Puerto Rico, but it was so big, and Puerto Rican artists so inspired artists from other countries that today, they do it everywhere and very successfully," he says. But "once you make it in Puerto Rico, it's like a seal of approval."
WHAT'S NEXT FOR PUERTO RICO? "There are thousands of opportunities in Puerto Rico at any given time," Molusco says. "There are producers like Gaby Music and Chris Jedi who have built their recording and video studios for artists from Puerto Rico and outside artists who come to record here. We have tons of producers and composers on the island. We're a hotbed of talent in every sense of the word."

▸ Just The Beginning

Puerto Rico "still has a lot to show," according to La Buena Fortuna Global CEO Nelson "Polo" Montalvo. Thanks to the variety of music produced on the island, the amount of "per capita" talent across the music industry and its astonishing filming locations, Puerto Rico "could very well be a music-creation and distribution hub, sort of a one-stop shop," he suggests. Key to this development, he says, is the next generation of emerging music executives and entrepreneurs. "There is a unique group of industry leaders coming out of this small Caribbean island who are changing the landscape of the music business industry," Montalvo says. "New, creative ways of doing business are being developed from here."
WHAT'S NEXT FOR PUERTO RICO? "As an artist, I would say [rapper and Billboard Latin Artist on the Rise] Villano Antillano is the most promising rising talent right now out on the island," Montalvo says. "She has broken and redefined, or just plainly thrown all rules out the window, thus changing the music industry landscape and opening doors for many new, creatively different, out-of-the-box artists. This is a new world of possibilities."

▸ 80 Years Of Understanding

Nevarez Communications owner Mayna Nevarez says the global success of the music of Puerto Rico began over 80 years ago with Rafael Hernández's 1937 triumph "Lamento Borincano" and World War II classic "Mi Viejo San Juan" by Noel Estrada. She attributes the island's cultural success to Puerto Ricans' understanding of the Latino market and the "incredible influence" from the English-speaking market. In recent years, Nevarez has seen independent labels reemerge and more Gen Z and millennial women lead important projects globally in the industry. Financial incentives that the island offers are also attracting more film and TV crews, she says, and opening doors for the local talent, as well as the recent transmission of live events from Puerto Rico, including the first Spanish countdown for *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve* last year.

▸ Island Of Gold

Carlos Ortiz Rivera (known professionally as Chris Jedi), co-founder/producer of record label La Familia, is passionate about supporting the talent emerging from Puerto Rico, especially female artists. "It has been a long time since we've had a female superstar from Puerto Rico. We're looking for that," he says. And despite the global success of Bad Bunny and other Puerto Rican artists over the last few years, Jedi contends that the local music business remains underappreciated on the world stage. "Puerto Rico is the key piece. We are the influence and the guide to follow," he says. "It's an island where gold comes out all the time."

▸ 'Large And Significant Impact'

Following Bad Bunny's historic successes in 2022, ASM Global regional GM Jorge L. Perez says Puerto Rico is "producing a slew of promising newcomers projected to have worldwide reach in the next 12 to 24 months," including Mora, Eladio Carrión and Young Miko. The Coliseo is a growing worldwide presence with 60% non-Puerto Rican performers and roughly 100,000 fans from outside the island gracing the venue in 2022, according to Perez. With the addition of the recently opened entertainment complex Distrito T-Mobile managed by ASM Global, "our aim is to use our venues in Puerto Rico to increase hotel occupancy through world-class live events" to increase the average length of stay which is currently just under three days, Perez says. "Every additional day will have an economic impact of $750 million for our island."

▸ Demand Keeps Growing

Puerto Rico's cultural impact on a global scale is undeniable, and the growing demand for its artists and regional genres like reggaetón and Latin trap continues to boom, says Omar "Omi" Rivera, founder and talent manager at Omi Management (Arcángel, Myke Towers). The industry infrastructure (in a region that has more music studios than schools) widely supports its local talent and vibrant music scene, "making it a hub for music production and an incubator for emerging new artists," he adds. In turn, this has drawn the attention of international awards shows like *Premios Juventud* and *Premios Tu Música Urbano*. The exponential growth of music from the island in recent years has led to "the rise of new artists from [Puerto Rico] and other Spanish-speaking countries, creating opportunities for the local music industry to expand and reach new audiences [while] attracting more investment [in] and attention to the island's local scene."

▸ Not An Overnight Success

With a career trajectory that spans over 20 years, José "Pompi" Vallejo, co-founder of global live-entertainment, marketing and media company Mr. and Mrs. Entertainment, says the Puerto Rican music industry has worked nonstop for the global recognition it has today. But now, there are more "high-caliber professionals" in entertainment thanks to new university courses and the aid provided by the island's Department of Economic Development to creative industries and entrepreneurs. "As a professor at one of the universities that offer these courses," he says, "I have been able to see firsthand that the best is yet to come, not only in the music creation but also in the technical part that every artist needs on their team and that's so important in the success of a project."

CONTRIBUTORS
Leila Cobo, Griselda Flores, Sigal Ratner-Arias, Isabela Raygoza, Jessica Roiz

BANCO POPULAR

Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot

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No. 21

PEAK ON *BILLBOARD'S*
HOT RAP SONGS CHART

Tate photographed by Joelle Grace Taylor on Feb. 22 in Los Angeles.

BABY TATE

How the rapper-singer took a timeless ’80s hook and turned it into her breakthrough hit

▷ While Baby Tate, 26, has had her eye on music stardom since she was a young girl, she had another dream, too. “I wanted to be a cheerleader real bad, but I went to a performing arts high school, so we had no sports at all.” Still, she achieved her pom-pom-filled dreams on her own terms with her 2016 single, “Hey, Mickey!,” that interpolated Toni Basil’s Billboard Hot 100 hit, “Mickey,” released in 1981. And now, seven years later, she’s reliving her fantasy thanks to the song going viral. The latest example of the TikTok-to-charts pipeline, “Hey, Mickey!” began racking up listens in January after K-pop fans started using the sound on edits of their favorite acts, including Stray Kids and BIBI, posted to social media. Soon after, Quinn Goydish — who manages Tate alongside his LVRN partner, executive vp/GM Amber Grimes — noticed a bump in the song’s total daily plays, from dozens of streams to thousands. To date, it has been used in over 1.6 million user-created videos on TikTok.

At the time of the song’s creation, Tate was performing as Yung Baby Tate, a budding artist living in her hometown of Atlanta making a few hundred dollars per show. “I remember a song doing 300 streams in a day, and I was so excited,” she says. “It’s so crazy how [our] perspective of success can change.” After receiving the beat from a producer who often sent sounds her way, Tate quickly recorded Basil’s famous “Mickey” chant over the wonky production on a Snowball USB microphone. “Hey, Mickey!” “was the best song of all of my old songs to go viral,” she says.

Since recording the track, Tate has dropped the “Yung” from her stage name and signed a record deal with Warner Records in 2021, as well as a management deal with LVRN in 2022. That support helped her kick things into high gear as “Hey, Mickey!” took off, with her team meticulously planning a TikTok strategy, rereleases and remix ideas. “Tate immediately leaning in on TikTok was the first thing that helped,” says Goydish. Adds Grimes: “Jumping on a [music] video as fast as we could made all the difference. We were able to capitalize in less than three months off a visual to keep this going.”

By early February, “Hey, Mickey!” had reached *Billboard*’s Hot Rap Songs and Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs charts. Later that month, she released *Hey, Mickey! — Full Pack*, an EP including sped-up, bass-boosted and slowed-down versions of the song — a new strategy popularized by TikTok. And there’s still more to come: Two remixes are on the way (the second of which will be accompanied by what Tate deems the “official” music video, featuring a woman rapper and potentially another surprise guest), and she also hopes to release a new album this year — despite not creating any songs for it just yet. “This is the first project that I’m beginning from scratch with both Warner and LVRN by my side, so I’m really excited to get into the creation of it,” she says. “I want to start with a clean slate.” —NEENA ROUHANI

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